

Dead-End Tohka

Spirit No. 10

Astral Dress—Princess Gown

Weapon—Throne Type [Sandalphon]

01

***Koushi
Tachibana***

Illustrated by

Tsunako



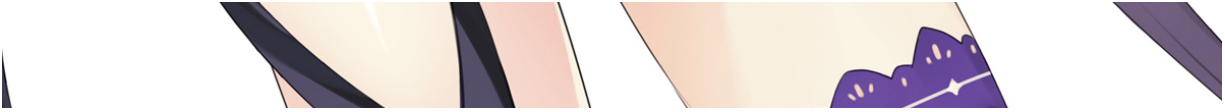
Date A Live

Dead-End Tohka

*Date
A Live*

Dead-End Tohka







"Y-you're..."

Shido Itsuka

An average high school student

"...My name?
I don't
have one."

A Spirit

A mysterious girl

“Good to have you. Welcome to Ratatoskr.”

*Kotori
Itsuka*

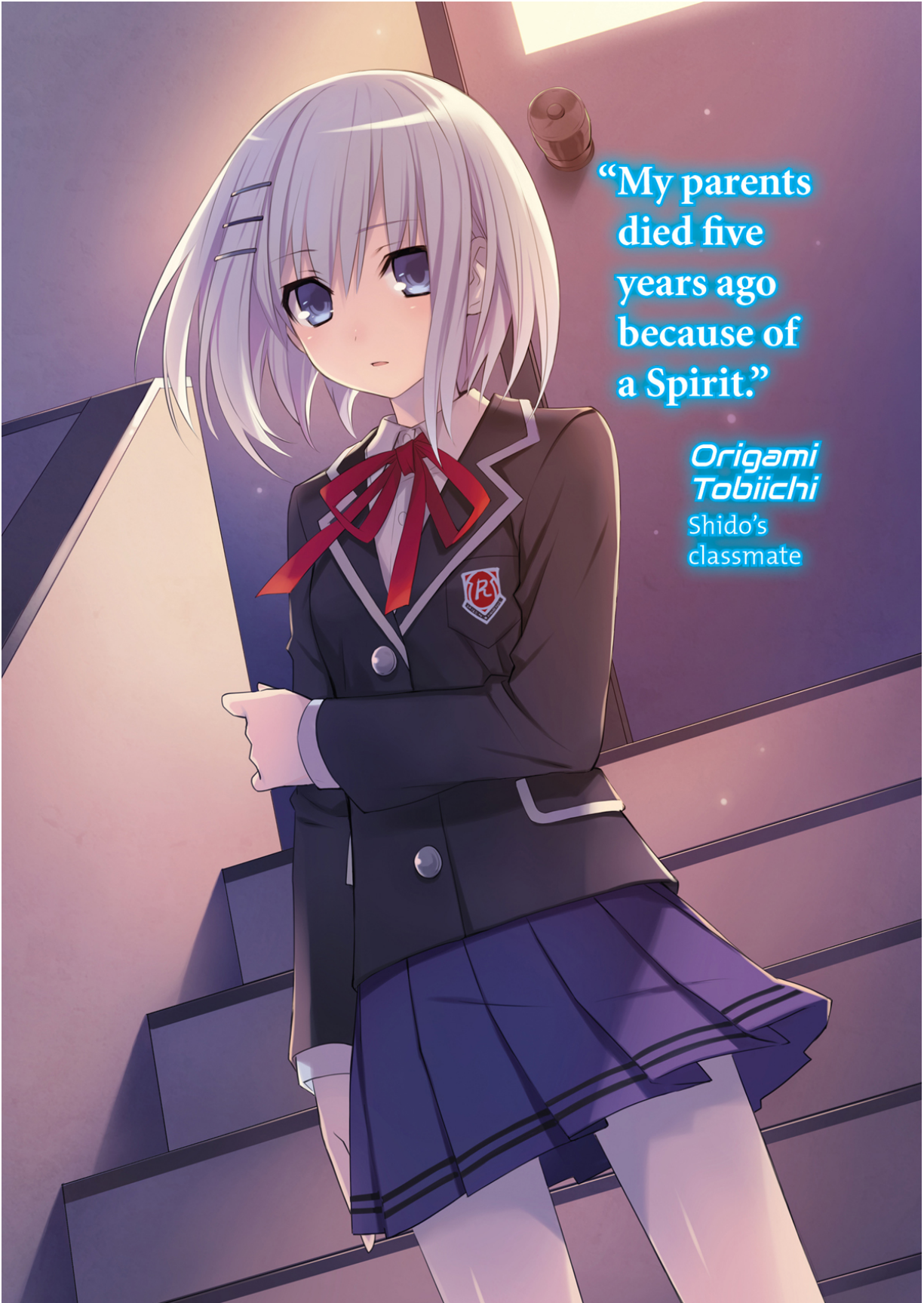
The commander
and Shido's
younger sister

*Kyouhei
Kannazuki*

The vice commander







“My parents
died five
years ago
because of
a Spirit.”

*Origami
Tobiichi*
Shido's
classmate





“Tohka! Take my hand!
That’s all you need to do...for now...!”

“...Are
you sure
it’s okay
for me
to live?”

“Take her down
with one shot!”

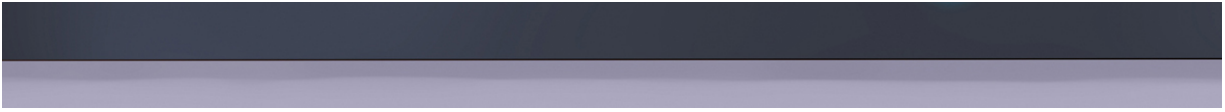
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*Reine
Murasame*
An analyst
for Ratatoskr

**“To go on a date with Spirits, you’ll need to
train with this romance simulation game.”**



Date A Live

Dead-End Tohka

01

Koushi Tachibana

Illustrated by
Tsunako

 YEN
ON
New York

Copyright

Date A Live 01
Dead-End Tohka

Koushi Tachibana

Translation by Jocelyne Allen
Cover art by Tsunako

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Spirit

A uniquely catastrophic creature existing in a parallel world. Cause of occurrence and reason for existence unknown. Creates a spacequake and inflicts serious damage on her surroundings whenever she appears in this world. A very powerful fighter.

Strategy No. 1

Annihilate with force. This approach is very difficult, since the Spirit is extremely powerful, as noted above.

Strategy No. 2

...Date her and make her all weak in the knees.

Dead-End Tohka

Spirit No. 10
Astral Dress—Princess Gown
Weapon—Throne Type [Sandalphon]



Prologue

Chance Meeting: Restart

His breath caught in his throat.

It was just so surreal.

The city had been obliterated, erased from existence.

In its place lay a crater so massive, it looked as if a meteor had touched down.

Human shadows floated toward the sky.

It was a sight so absurd that it had to be a dream or a hallucination.

However, Shido was only vaguely aware of his surroundings. There was something far more unusual before his eyes.

A girl.

A lone girl stood in front of him, wearing a peculiar dress made of light.

“Ah...”

Her voice faded into a soft sigh.

Her physical presence was so mesmerizing that it made everything else seem like a pale imitation of reality. Her dress caught Shido’s attention, woven from a strange material that wasn’t exactly metal or fabric. It flared out into a glowing skirt that was so striking, he nearly lost consciousness.

However, her countenance seemed to dull its light, forcing everything else into the background.

Long hair as dark as night cascaded down to her waist, coiling around her shoulders like smoke. Her eyes were fixed up on the clear sky, and they were an indescribable color. Her face would have made goddesses green with envy, though it was clouded with gloom, lips pursed.

In an instant, she had captured...

His gaze.

His attention.

And his heart.

She was just that *beautiful*...

To a fault.

To an extreme.

One might've even called it *violent*.

"Wh-who...?" Shido stammered, stunned.

He knew this might be sacrilegious—and that he might be divinely punished for it.

The girl slowly lowered her gaze.

"My name?"

Her voice was pure honey, decadent sound waves traveling through the air.

"I don't have one," she admitted, sounding somewhat distressed.

Their eyes met...and that was how Shido Itsuka's story began.

Chapter 1

A Girl with No Name

“Aah...”

He woke up feeling like crap.

It was hard to imagine anyone would be pleased to discover their little sister excitedly sambaing on top of their chest and head.

...With the exception of a few enthusiasts.

April 10. Monday.

Spring break had ended the day before, which meant it was the first day of the new school term.

Shido Itsuka rubbed his bleary eyes, groaning. “Aah, Kotori. My adorable little sister.”

“Huh?!”

Kotori whirled around to face him, one foot firmly planted on his stomach, the skirt of her junior high school uniform swaying. She had finally noticed he was awake.

Her long hair had been parted into pigtails, and she stared down at him with eyes as round as walnuts.

She didn’t look particularly guilty or apologetic—no cries of “Yikes!” or “Caught in the act!”—even though she’d just been stomping on him. In fact, she looked genuinely pleased with Shido’s awakening.

He could see her underwear from this position. And it wasn’t just a glimpse. This was beyond inappropriate.





"My adorable big brother! What's up?!" Kotori cried, showing no sign of lifting her foot.

Just to be clear: Shido was not adorable.

"Ugh. Get off. You're heavy."

Kotori nodded theatrically, launching off his stomach to leap from the bed—and to deliver one final body blow.

"Gouf!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! 'Gouf!' he says! That's a Gundam Ground Type! Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"..." Shido wordlessly pulled the covers over his head.

"Aaah! C'mon! Why are you going back to sleep?!" Kotori started to shake him violently.

"Ten more minutes..."

"No! You have to get up!"

As Kotori rattled Shido's sluggish brain in his skull, he frowned, straining to speak. "...R-run..."

"What?"

"...I've been infected with the T-virus—short for the 'Ten More Minutes in Bed, or I'll Subject My Sister to Tickle Hell' disease..."

"Wh-what?!" Kotori was shocked, as if she'd just decoded a secret message from aliens.

"Run...while I'm still conscious..."

"B-but what will happen to you?!"

"Just leave me here... Save yourself..."

"I can't do that! Big Bro!"

"Gaaah!" Shido threw off his blankets and wriggled his fingers.

"Eeeeeeeek!" Kotori shrieked, scrambling out of the room.

"...Geez." He sighed, pulling his blankets back up. It wasn't even six yet, according to his clock. "Why did she have to wake me up at this ungodly hour...?" he grumbled.

As his foggy mind started to clear up, he remembered what had happened the previous night.

Their parents had departed the day before on some kind

of business trip, which left Shido in charge of the kitchen. Since he'd never been much of a morning person, he had asked Kotori to be his alarm clock.

"Ohhh..."

I shouldn't have done that. He sat up in bed, scratching his head. With a big yawn, he smoothed down his bedhead before tottering out of the room.

The small mirror on the wall caught his attention. He squinted at his reflection—looking through his bangs, which had gotten too long to be considered bangs. He hadn't had a chance to get his hair cut.

"..."

Just like his visual acuity, his appearance had gotten worse over the years. He sighed before trudging down the stairs into the living room.

"...Huh?"

The house looked a little different from usual. The wooden table had been dragged away from the middle of the room, acting as a barricade against a wall. He could see pigtails quivering behind it.

"..." He stealthily tiptoed to the side of the table.

Sure enough, Kotori was sitting there, trembling, her arms hugging her knees.

"Boo!" He grabbed her shoulders.

"Eeek! Eeeeeaah!" Kotori flailed her arms and legs, but her shriek wasn't exactly cute.

"Whoa there! Calm down! It's me."

"Aaaaah! Eeek! ...Uh? Wait. Big Bro?"

"Yup."

"N-nothing scary?"

"Nothing scary. I come in peace. Me, friend."

"O-oh."

Kotori's tense face relaxed, almost like a wild squirrel that had given him its trust.

"Sorry. I'll make breakfast right away."

He took her hand to pull her to her feet before righting

the table and heading toward the kitchen.

From time to time, their parents went out of town on business trips for their shared workplace—a major electronics manufacturer. That meant Shido was in charge of cooking. He'd gotten used to it. In fact, he was confident that he knew his way around the kitchen better than his mother did.

As he fetched some eggs from the fridge, Shido heard the television turn on behind him. Kotori had apparently lowered her heart rate enough to turn it on.

Part of her morning routine was to channel surf for daily horoscopes and fortune-telling segments. That said, those readings always marked the end of the program. After flipping through all the channels, she watched the news, bored.

“Early this morning, in the outskirts of Tengu...”

“Hmm?” Shido rarely paid attention to the background noise, but this made his eyebrows shoot up. The reason was simple: The announcer had clearly stated the name of a familiar city. “Huh? That’s pretty close. Something happen?” He leaned over the kitchen counter to get a better look at the TV.

Everything on the screen had been absolutely decimated.

Buildings and roadways had given way, broken down into a pile of rubble. It was a disaster on par with a meteor strike.

Shido frowned, sighing. “Aah... A spacequake?” He shook his head.

The phenomenon known as a *spatial quake* encompassed a broad scope of tremors. Because no one knew how or why they occurred, it was impossible to predict one or know the scale of one’s damage. Spacequakes included everything from explosions to earthquakes to evanescence.

It made as much sense as a giant monster destroying the city on a whim.

The first instance of such an anomaly was observed thirty

years ago.

Over the course of a night, something had gouged out the middle of the Eurasian continent—in a territory containing the former Soviet Union, China, and Mongolia. Shido's generation had seen one too many photographs of the disaster in textbooks.

There had been nothing left. It was as though a giant eraser had been taken to the region, leaving approximately 150 million people dead.

A disaster on this scale was a first for recorded history. In the six months following that first incident, this phenomenon occurred in areas around the world, albeit on a smaller scale.

If Shido's memory served him right, there had been around fifty events. Spacequakes had been seen on every continent, at the north pole, in the ocean, and on smaller islands.

Naturally, Japan was no exception. Six months after the Eurasian disaster, a perfect circle of scorched earth had materialized over a zone south of Tokyo and north of Kanagawa Prefecture. Everything had simply been deleted. That was the very region where Shido and his family now lived.

"Didn't they stop for a while?" he asked. "I wonder why there's more of them now."

"I dunno!" Kotori cocked her head to one side, eyes glued to the TV.

After the Kanto incident, time and space had been spared the disturbances for some time. That was, until five years ago, when there'd been a spacequake in the redeveloped city now known as Tengu. Ever since, there'd been sporadic tremors of unknown cause—the majority of them in Japan.

Of course, it wasn't as though humans had been twiddling their thumbs during the twenty-five years between the Eurasian spacequake and the Tengu one. The

nationwide construction of underground shelters had exploded thirty years ago, beginning with the redeveloped areas. It had become possible to measure the warning signs of a spacequake in advance. Above all else, they had the disaster relief corps in Self-Defense Forces.

The corps had been formed with the objective of rebuilding the devastated facilities and roadways in the disaster zone. They worked their “magic” and managed to completely restore these ravaged towns in an impossibly short time.

The nature of their efforts was classified, so what happened behind the scenes wasn’t public knowledge. Still, it did feel like witnessing a magic trick to see obliterated buildings restored to their original form overnight. However, these speedy repairs didn’t make the spacequakes any less of a threat.

“Don’t you think there’s been one too many quakes around here?” Shido inquired. “Especially in the last year.”

“...Hmm, I guess. Maybe faster than scheduled,” Kotori said, leaning over the armrest of the sofa.

“Faster? What’s faster?”

“Mm, naafing.”

He gave her a quizzical look. He was less interested in what she had said than the fact that her voice was oddly muffled.

“...”

Without a word, he went around the counter and walked over to where she sat on the sofa.

As he approached, she slowly turned her face away.

“Kotori, look this way for a sec.”

“...”

“Now.”

“Ngah!”

He planted his hand on her head and forced her to face him. A strange sound escaped her throat.

“I knew it!” He saw exactly what he had expected to see

in her mouth.

They hadn't even had breakfast, but Kotori was already enjoying her favorite candy: a Chupa Chups lollipop.

"C'mon! I told you: No candy before meals."

"Mm! Mm!"

He yanked on the stick to try and tug the candy out, and Kotori clamped her lips together to resist. Her face started to distort in the direction he was pulling, making her adorable countenance kind of ugly.

"...Honestly. You have to eat a proper breakfast. Got it?"

In the end, he gave in, tousling her hair before heading back to the kitchen.

"Yup! I love you, Big Bro!"

He shooed her away and got back to work. "...Oh, that reminds me. Isn't today the entrance ceremony for junior high?"

"Uh-huh."

"So that means you'll be home around noon... Anything you want to eat for lunch?"

"Hmm." Kotori bobbed her head back and forth as she considered the question. Then she shot up in her seat. "A Deluxe Kid's Meal!"

It was an item from the children's menu offered by a local restaurant.

Shido snapped to attention and inclined his upper body exactly forty-five degrees forward. "I'm afraid we don't offer that at our establishment."

"What?" she cried unhappily, flicking the lollipop stick from side to side.

He sighed and shrugged. "...Oh, fine. I guess it's a special day. How about we go out for lunch?"

"Oh!" Kotori squealed. "Really?!"

"Sure. Meet at the usual spot once school's over."

Kotori waved her hands excitedly. "You swear? It's a promise?! Even if there's an earthquake or a fire or a spacequake, even if the restaurant gets taken over by

terrorists, you have to promise!”

“Wait. If it gets taken over, they’re not going to be serving food.”

“Promise!” she insisted.

“Okay, okay, I promise.”

“Whoo-hoo!” She threw her hands up into the air.

Shido thought he might be acting too nice, but well, today was special.

I’ll be in charge of cooking for a while anyway. And today, we’ll both be attending our own entrance ceremonies. We can indulge a little. Although I’m not sure how much of an indulgence a kid’s meal is at seven hundred eighty yen.

“Hmm.” He reached up to open the small kitchen window.

The sky was so clear, it almost promised it would be a good day.



The clock had just hit 8:15 AM when Shido arrived at school. He checked the class list posted in the hallway and then headed to the classroom that would be his home for the next school year.

“Year Two... Class Four, huh?”

After the spacequake turned this region into a wasteland thirty years earlier, the area had been redeveloped as a test city with cutting-edge technologies. Raizen High, the public school Shido attended, was one product of this.

In addition to the facilities that seemed impossible for a public school, both the interior and exterior were in pristine condition, since the place had only been built a few years earlier. Naturally, it featured the latest in underground shelters, seeing it was on the site of a disaster.

Perhaps that was the reason for the institution’s low

acceptance rate. Shido had struggled to get in when he'd decided to take the entrance exam solely because the school was close to his house.

"Hmm." He quietly groaned and then looked around the classroom for no particular reason.

There was still some time before homeroom, but a fair number of his classmates were already seated at their desks. Some were chatting happily, excited to be in the same class, while others sat alone, looking bored. He couldn't see too many familiar faces.

He decided to check the seating chart on the blackboard.

"Shido Itsuka."

He heard a quiet, inflectionless call from behind him.

"Hmm...?"

Curious about the owner of this unfamiliar voice, he looked back and saw a slender girl standing there.

Her hair skimmed her shoulders, and she looked like a doll, which caught Shido's attention. It was hard to imagine anyone would object to that. It was like her parts had been precision machined to perfection. At the same time, her face was completely devoid of anything that could have been called an expression.

"Um...?" He checked to see that there were no other Shido Itsukas in the area. After he confirmed he was the only one, he raised an eyebrow, pointing at himself. "...Me?"

"Yes." The girl gave him the tiniest nod as she looked directly at him without any emotion whatsoever.

"H-how do you know my name?"

She seemed confused by the question. "You don't remember?"

"...Uh."

"I see," she noted, without sounding particularly dejected. She walked over to a desk near the window, where she drew back her seat, pulled out a thick engineering book, and began to read.

"Wh-what the...?" Shido scratched his cheek and

furrowed his brow.

This girl acted like she knew him, but where had they met?

“Hi-yah!” A perfect karate chop slammed into his back.

“Oof!” He rubbed at the sore spot. “Ow! What do you think you’re doing, Tonomachi?!”

He knew the culprit immediately.

“Oh-ho! You seem to be in good spirits, sexual beast Itsuka!” Instead of commenting that they were lucky to be in the same class, Shido’s best friend, Hiroto Tonomachi, crossed his arms and leaned back, cackling, showing off his toned body and spiked hair.

“Sex... What?” Shido frowned.

“Sexual beast, you dirty boy. I let you outta my sight for one second, and you turn into a horndog. When did you get all chummy with Tobiichi, huh?”

With a huge grin, Tonomachi slipped an arm around Shido’s neck.

“Tobiichi...?” Shido asked. “Who’s that?”

“Don’t play dumb. You were literally just talking to her.” Tonomachi jerked his chin in the direction of the window seats. And the girl sitting there.

Maybe she sensed Shido’s eyes on her, because she lifted her head from the pages of her book and turned toward him.

“...” Shido held his breath and looked away awkwardly. Tonomachi, meanwhile, smiled and waved.

“...” Without reacting to either of them, the girl returned her gaze to the publication in her hands.

“See? Check that out,” Tonomachi said. “The most difficult girl in the school. They call her Permafrost, Cold War, Kacrackle. How the hell did you reel her in?”

“Huh...? Wh-what are you on about?”

“No way. Don’t tell me you seriously don’t know.”

“...Hmm. I don’t remember her from last year.”

Tonomachi threw his hands up with a surprised look on

his face, as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. He was always overreacting to everything.

"It's Tobiichi," he said. "Origami Tobiichi. Super genius. The pride of our school? You never heard of her?"

"No. Never... So she's pretty great, I guess?"

"It's not a matter of being great," Tonomachi informed him. "She always gets the highest marks in our grade. And on the mock exams, her score was wild—number one in the whole *country*. Brace yourself to drop a rank in this class."

"Huh? Why would she be in a public school?"

"Dunno. Maybe some kind of family sitch?" Tonomachi shrugged dramatically. "And it's not just that. She's a killer athlete, and she's turning into a real cutie. She was number three on last year's Thirteen Most Dateable Girls list, y'know? You didn't see that?"

"I didn't even know such a list existed," Shido replied. "And thirteen? Why would they pick such a random number?"

"The girl who put together the list was number thirteen."

"...Ohhh." Shido smiled wanly. Apparently, she just *had* to be on the list.

"By the way," Tonomachi continued. "There were three hundred fifty-eight boys listed for the Most Dateable Guys."

"That many?! Coming in last means would mean you've made it onto the Least Dateable list! Who decided on three hundred fifty-eight? Was it the person who ran the poll?"

"Yeah. Some people seriously don't know when to give up."

"And what number were you, Tonomachi?"

"Three hundred fifty-eight."

"*You're* the one who put it together?!"

"Apparently, my love feels 'suffocating,' I'm 'too hairy,' and the space under my big toenail 'probably stinks.'"

"That *is* the Least Dateable list!" Shido cried.

"Well, to be honest, the guys at the bottom didn't get a single vote. It was like a contest to see who had the least

negative points.”

“That’s some kind of self-inflicted torture! You could just not do it, you know!”

“Relax, Itsuka. You got a vote from someone who wanted to stay anonymous, so you were fifty-two.”

“What am I supposed to say to that?!”

“Well, the general public said you ‘don’t seem that interested in girls’ and that you’re ‘probably gay.’”

“You didn’t have to tell me that!”

“Calm down, man. For Best Couple, the shippers chose you and me for number two.”

“That doesn’t make me happy at all!” Shido wailed, unable to hold back. Unfortunately, he was morbidly curious about who ranked as the number one couple.

Tonomachi didn’t seem bothered by it (or rather...he seemed like he had already moved past it), and he crossed his arms as if to say they should get back to the point at hand.

“Anyway, it’s no exaggeration to say that Tobiichi is the most famous person at school. The fact that you don’t seem to know her, Itsuka, does come as quite the surprise to your good pal Tonomachi.”

“Ugh, could you please drop it?” Shido groaned. No sooner had he done so than a familiar bell chimed, reminding him that he still hadn’t checked where his desk was. “Whoops.”

Following the seating chart on the blackboard, Shido set his bag down in a spot in the second row from the window and looked around.

“...Oh.”

In an odd twist of fate, his desk was right beside that of their grade’s leading lady.

Origami Tobiichi closed her book before the bell finished ringing and tucked it away in her desk. Then she looked forward, displaying a beautiful profile of impossible precision.

“...”

Feeling a little uncomfortable, Shido turned his attention to the chalkboard.

As if on cue, the classroom door rattled open. A woman with a small build wearing thin-rimmed glasses stepped inside, marching up to the podium at the front of the class.

He heard the other students whispering around him.

“It’s Tama...”

“Aah, we got Tama.”

“For real? All right!”

The chatter seemed to be positive overall.

“Good morning, everyone,” the woman said, her voice lilting and slow. “I will be your homeroom teacher for the next year. My name is Tamae Okamine.”

Licensed educator in charge of social studies, Tamae Okamine (aka Tama) bowed to the class. Her glasses slid forward—they must not have been the right size—and she hurriedly pushed them back up with both hands.

Even her harshest critic would assume that she was the same age as her pupils upon seeing her youthful face and small build. She was a student favorite, given her generally easygoing personality.

“...?”

While Shido’s classmates grew more excited, his own face stiffened. Origami was now staring hard at him.

Their eyes met briefly, and he hurried to look away.

Why on earth was she looking at him? Well, it wasn’t like she wasn’t allowed to look at him, and she might have been looking at something on the other side of him, but either way, he felt flustered by the whole exchange.

“...Wh-what is going on...?” he muttered, too quiet for anyone else to hear, a trail of sweat running down his cheek.

Three hours later, Tonomachi came over to Shido.

"Itsukaaaa, you must be free, right? Wanna grab a bite?" he asked, bag slung over his shoulder, while the other students got their things together and left the classroom after the entrance ceremony.

School never ended at noon except during exam periods, and groups could be seen discussing where they should go for lunch.

Shido was about to say yes and then remembered he couldn't. "Oh! Sorry, I have plans today."

"What? A girl?"

"Uhhh, well... Kind of?"

"What?!" Tonomachi threw his arms up and lifted a leg, in a pose like the famed Glico running man. "What *happened* over spring break?! First, you're chatting all chummy with *the* Tobiichi, and now you got a lunch date with a girl?! I thought we swore we'd try to be virgins until we're thirty and ascend to further greatness?!"

"Uh, I don't remember agreeing to that... And, like, the girl is Kotori, okay?"

Tonomachi let out a relieved sigh. "Don't scare me like that."

"You got worked up all by yourself."

"But, well, it shouldn't be a problem if it's just little Kotori. Can I come, too?"

"Hmm? That's probably fine..., " Shido accepted.

Tonomachi set an elbow on Shido's desk, leaning in dramatically.

"Hey," he whispered. "Kotori is already in her second year of middle school, right? She got a boyfriend?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, no ulterior motives here. Just wondering if she would go for a guy three years older."

"...Actually, I take it back. You can't come." Shido glared at his friend and shoved his face back.

"What?! Bro!"

“Don’t ‘bro’ me. Ugh.” Shido scowled.

Tonomachi pulled himself back up and shrugged. “Ha-ha! Well, I’m not crass enough to crash a sacred bonding moment between brother and sister. Have fun, but don’t take it too far. Don’t wanna break any laws.”

"You always go too far," Shido said, his cheek twitching.

Tonomachi made a shocked face. “It’s just, Kotori is supercute. Living under the same roof must be heaven.”

"If you actually had a sister, you wouldn't think that."

“Ah... I’ve heard that before: Kid sisters aren’t so cute when you actually have one. So I guess it’s true?”

“Yeah, I don’t see her as a girl... She’s just a creature called a *sister*,” Shido declared curtly.

“So that’s how it is, huh?” Tonomachi grinned wryly.

"That's how it is. It's the *kid* part of *kid sister*."

“What about big sisters then?” Tonomachi pressed.

“Like a giant woman?” Shido asked.

“Whoa! Think of enormous ladies roaming the earth!”
Tonomachi laughed.

Vwnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnmmmmm.

“...gh?!”

At that moment, the panes in the classroom started to rattle, and Shido could hear an eerie siren wailing throughout the town.

“Wh-what...was that...?” Tonomachi opened a window and poked his head outside. Several crows took off into the air, perhaps startled by the siren.

The students lingering behind in the classroom all stopped talking, and their eyes grew wide.

The siren stopped, and a voice came over the loudspeakers, enunciating each word clearly to make the message easier to hear.

"This is not a drill. I repeat. This is not a drill. A

foreshock has been detected. A spacequake is coming. All residents, please evacuate immediately to the nearest shelter. I repeat..."

The silent students gasped. A spacequake warning. Their hunches turned immediately to conviction.

"Whoa, whoa... For real?" Tonomachi's voice was hoarse, and sweat beaded on his forehead.

Although everyone in the classroom looked anxious, they were relatively calm, including Shido and Tonomachi. At the very least, no one was spiraling into total panic. Because the city had been seriously damaged in the spacequake thirty years earlier, Shido and his cohort had marched through an annoying amount of evacuation drills since they were in nursery school.

Plus, they were in a school equipped with an underground shelter large enough to hold every student on the register.

"The shelter's right there," Shido said. "We just have to evacuate calmly, and we'll be fine."

"R-right." Tonomachi nodded.

They hurried, not quite running, out of the classroom. The hallway was already full of students forming lines and heading toward the shelter.

Just one of them was going in the opposite direction—a girl racing toward the doors that led outside.

"Tobiichi...?"

Running down the hallway with her skirt flapping in the wind was *the* Origami Tobiichi.

"Hey! What are you doing?! The shelter's this—"

"It's fine," Origami stated, stopping briefly before racing off again.

"Fine? What's fine?" Shido craned his neck dubiously as he lined up with Tonomachi and the other students.

He was worried about Origami, but maybe she'd forgotten something. Just because the alarm had gone off didn't mean that there would be a spacequake right that

second. She'd make it in time if she came back soon.

"P-please stay calm! I-it's all right! Don't panic!" Tamae called out, guiding the students. "Remember the three *don'ts*!! Don't push! Don't run! And don't t-t-twalk!" she squeaked.

Shido could hear some students snickering in response.

"...It's weird," Tonomachi said. "But seeing someone more freaked than me makes me feel better."

"Aah, I totally understand." Shido smiled wryly.

In fact, Tama's helpless panic seemed to be putting the majority of the students at ease instead of making them more anxious.

Shido suddenly remembered something and reached into his pocket for his cell phone.

"Hmm? What's up, Itsuka?"

"Oh, just, you know," Shido muttered vaguely as he selected the name *Kotori Itsuka* from his call history and redialed.

He couldn't get through. He tried a few times, but no dice. "...That's not good. I hope she's getting to safety."

He was sure she'd be fine, as long as she hadn't left school. The problem was if she had already started out for the restaurant.

There was a park shelter right near there, though, so that wasn't really an issue, either. The thought didn't reassure Shido, however. He could easily picture Kotori ignoring the alarm and waiting for him in front of the restaurant like a faithful dog. Her "*Promise!*" from that morning echoed in the back of his mind.

"I—I did agree to be there, even if there was a spacequake...but she couldn't actually be that stupid... Oh right. I know."

Shido could use an app to check the GPS location of her cell phone. After fiddling with his phone, an aerial map of the town was displayed on his screen, together with a red icon.

“—!” Shido’s heart stopped.

The icon indicating Kotori’s position was parked in front of the restaurant where they were supposed to meet.

“That idiot...!” Cursing under his breath, Shido closed his flip phone and stepped out of the line of students.

“H-hey! Itsuka!” Tonomachi shouted. “Where are you going?!”

“Sorry! Forgot something! You go on ahead!”

Shido ran in the opposite direction of his gathered classmates until he reached the school’s main entrance. He grabbed his outdoor shoes from his shoe cubby, stuffed his feet into them, and scrambled outside. Practically tripping over himself, he raced through the gates and down the hill in front of the school.

“...Th-this situation obviously calls for an evacuation!” Shido shouted, moving his legs as fast as they would carry him.

Before him was a disturbing sight. Deserted sidewalks and carless roads. There wasn’t a single person left on the street, in the parks, in the shops—anywhere. There was a lingering sense that people had just occupied these spaces moments ago, but they were nowhere to be seen now. It was a scene out of a horror movie.

The city of Tengu had been redeveloped with an almost neurotic sensitivity to spacequakes after the catastrophe. Naturally, it ranked first nationwide for the number of underground shelters at public facilities and came in at the top for shelters in residential homes. With the recent spate of spacequakes, the evacuation had been immediate.

“Why would that idiot stay put?!” Shido shouted, flipping his phone open as he ran.

Her location had not budged from in front of the restaurant. He decided that her punishment would be a barrage of forehead flicks. He kept pumping his legs at full speed.

There was no pacing himself. Shido simply struck at the

asphalt as hard as he could. His feet hurt, and the tips of his fingers went numb. His throat closed up, his vision started to spin, and the inside of his mouth was desert dry. But Shido didn't stop. All thoughts of danger or exhaustion had left his head. He simply ran toward Kotori with no regard for anything else!

"...Ngh—?"

And then Shido spotted something in the corner of his eye. Or he felt like he did anyway. Frowning, he turned his face.

"Wait—! What is that...?"

Three—no, four—human silhouettes were floating in the air. But he didn't get the chance to ponder them for long.

"Whoa...?!" He instinctively covered his eyes as the buildings up ahead of him were suddenly enveloped in a blinding light, followed by an earsplitting explosion. A powerful shock wave slammed into him.

"Wha...?!"

He reflexively covered his face with his arms and braced his feet, but it was no use. The shock wave's pressure was on par with that of a large typhoon, and it easily blew him back. He lost his balance and tumbled over.

"Ow! What the hell was...?" He sat up, rubbing eyes that were momentarily blinded by the intense flash. "Huh?" The scene left him gaping.

In that brief instant he'd had his eyes closed, the town he'd been staring at had...*disappeared* without a trace.

"Wh-what? Wait. What is this...?!" Shido stammered.

It was like an asteroid had fallen from the sky. No metaphor. No exaggeration. If he had to describe it, the scene resembled what might've happened if the uppermost layer of the ground had been carried off like a platter with the town on top of it. It had been hollowed out like a shallow mortar.

The neighborhood had become a giant smoking pit, and Shido could see a mass of metal rising in the center of the

desolate landscape.

“What the...?”

He was too far away to really make out the details, but it kind of looked like a throne, the sort of thing a king would sit atop in an RPG. But that wasn’t the important part.

The real mystery was the girl wearing a bizarre dress standing there with one foot on the armrest.

“What is she *doing*?” Shido couldn’t see much more than her long black hair and her glowing skirt, but he probably wasn’t wrong in assuming it was a girl.

She lazily turned her head in his direction.

“Hmm...?”

Had she...noticed him? The young woman was too far away for him to be sure.

While he was craning his neck to get a better look, the girl kept moving.

On unstable feet, she grabbed hold of what looked like a hilt sprouting from the throne’s back, slowly pulling it out to reveal a massive sword with a broad blade. It emitted a fantastical light, like a rainbow or a star. The girl swung the weapon in his direction, drawing a luminous arc in the air.

“Ah...?!” He immediately lowered his head. Or to be more precise, the arms that were holding him up off the ground where he lay turned to jelly, and his head dropped with a thud. “Wha—?”

The blade cut through where his head had been a mere heartbeat earlier.

It had to have been too far away to actually strike him... right?

“...Ah—”

Shido’s eyes flew open as he turned to look behind him. The houses and shops, tree-lined streets and signposts had all been bisected at the same height from the ground. A moment later, he heard the destruction—a rumble like distant thunder.

“Eek...?!” Fear beyond his comprehension made his

heart sink.

I don't get it.

What he did get, however, was that if he hadn't ducked just now, he would have been downsized like the world behind him.

"Th-this can't be real...!" Shido retreated as though his weak knees were being yanked back by an invisible force. He had to get as far away from this place as he could—as fast as he could.

However.

"You too...huh?"

"...Nngh?!"

The voice he heard from above sounded exhausted.

His vision caught up with his thoughts a beat later.

Standing before his eyes was a girl who had not been there a moment earlier. It was...the same one who had just been in the center of the crater.

"Oh," Shido said without thinking.

She was around his age, maybe a little younger. Black hair down to her knees, a face that was sweet yet imposing. In its center were eyes that shone with a curious glow—like crystals glittering under rainbow lights. Her outfit was also strange. Shido couldn't tell if the material was fabric or metal, but either way, it was shaped into something like a princess's dress. The seams and trim down the skirt were made of a mysterious film of light without any kind of physical substance.

The young woman's hands gripped an enormous sword that was maybe as tall as she was.

An unusual situation.

A peculiar appearance.

A unique existence.

Any one of these was more than enough to capture Shido's attention.

And yet... Ah.

None of these external factors was the real reason he

was so captivated by her.

Instantly, Shido's eyes were glued to this girl, making him forget his fear of dying and even the concept of breathing. That was how beautiful she was. She was almost aggressively beautiful.

"Wh-who...?" Shido stammered, stunned.

He knew this might be sacrilegious—and that he might be divinely punished for it.

The girl slowly lowered her gaze.

"My name?"

Her voice was pure honey, decadent sound waves traveling through the air.

"I don't have one," she admitted, sounding somewhat distressed.

"—Nngh!"

It was then—he met the girl's eyes for the first time.

At the same time, the face of the nameless young woman grew gloomy, like she might burst into tears at any moment. She readjusted her grip on the sword.

The faint sound of this movement revived fear in Shido's heart. "Hey... Stop! Stop!" he cried out desperately.

The young woman only looked down at him curiously. "...What?"

"Wh-what are you doing...?!"

"Killing you quickly, of course," the girl stated, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The color drained from his face.

"Wh-why...?!"

"Why...? That's obvious, isn't it?" Looking down on Shido wearily, she continued, "I mean, didn't you come to kill me, too?"

"Huh?" Shido's jaw dropped to the ground. "...Of course not."

"...What?" She stared at him with a mixture of surprise, suspicion, and bewilderment. It didn't take her long to shrug and look away from him, tilting her face up to the sky.

Following her lead, Shido moved his gaze upward.

“Wha...?!” He gasped, eyes widening an impossible degree.

Several people in strange outfits were flying through the sky—and the weapons in their hands were launching things that looked like missiles at Shido and the girl.

“Wah—Aaaaaaaaah?!” he shouted involuntarily.

A few seconds later, however, he was still there, very much alive. “Huh?”

The explosives had all stopped several meters above the girl, as if held back by an invisible hand.

She sighed languidly. “...You never learn. All this is futile.” The unusual young woman raised her free hand and clenched it tightly. The missiles folded in on themselves, crumpling, and exploded on the spot.

The scale of the blast was frighteningly small, as though the girl had absorbed the power of the weapons.

Shido could tell that the people in the sky were flustered, but they didn’t stop attacking. They kept launching missiles at her.

“Hmph,” the girl sighed, looking as though she were about to burst into tears—the same look as when she had turned her sword on him earlier.

Shido’s heart pounded even harder at this sight than it had when he nearly lost his life to her blade.

The whole thing was bizarre.

He didn’t know who the girl was, nor who the people in the sky were. But it was somehow clear to him that the curiously dressed young woman possessed greater power than the fliers.

This called a vague question to mind.

Why would someone so strong make that face?

“...Go away. Get out. Disappear...once and for all!”

She turned the sword, which shone with the same strange light as her eyes, up toward the sky. The swing came down—with marked sorrow and with exhaustion.

The air whistled.

“...Wh-whoa...!”

A shock wave shook heaven and earth. The attack shot into the sky, extending out from the sword itself. The people flying above dived to the sides to escape a direct hit.

In the next instant, a beam of unbelievably powerful light flashed from another direction, this one aimed at the girl.

“...Ngh!”

Shido covered his eyes on instinct.

This luminous ray was abruptly severed, like it had hit an invisible wall in the air above the girl. Like fireworks in the night sky, the light scattered and bounced away in every direction.

And then someone dropped down behind him.

“Wh-what the—?! It just keeps coming!”

He still had no idea what was going on. All of this seemed like a daydream of the nightmare variety. When he looked up at the person now standing to his rear, his entire body seized up.

He had to assume she was wearing some manner of machine. She was dressed in a bizarre bodysuit with large blasters on the back, and she was carrying a weapon shaped like a golf bag in her hands.

The reason Shido froze in place was simple. He had seen this girl before.

“Origami...Tobiichi?” he murmured the name Tonomachi had told him that morning.

The young woman with the extremely mechanized look was his classmate—Origami Tobiichi.

She glanced down at him.

“Shido Itsuka...?!” Origami shouted his name as if that were an answer to his question—no change at all in the blank expression on her face, but there was just a hint of surprise in her voice.

“...Huh? Wh-why are you wearing—?” Shido began, knowing it was a stupid question even as he started to ask

it. Too many things were happening all at once, and he didn't even know where to start unraveling the mysteries.

Origami quickly looked away from him and turned her attention to the girl in the dress.

That would make sense.

"Hmph." Just as she had before, the girl swung the sword in her hand at Origami.

Origami immediately kicked off from the ground, dodging the attack. Then she used the momentum to bear down on her opponent at lightning speed. In the blink of an eye, a blade of light materialized at the end of the weapon in her hands. She brought this sword down on the girl with everything she had.

"Mm!" The girl frowned slightly and stopped the blow with her own sword.

An intense shock wave rippled out from the point where their blades had crossed.

"Hey... Unh. Waaaaaaah?!" Crying out pathetically, Shido curled into a ball and made it through the chaos somehow.

Origami bounced back, so there was some distance between the two girls again. They glared at each other silently, weapons raised, ready to go at any moment, with Shido stuck in between them.

"..."

"..."

The situation was explosive. The battle threatened to start again at any moment if there was even the slightest trigger.

"..."

Shido was on tenterhooks. Sweat pouring down his forehead, he started wriggling along the ground to try and get away, wanting desperately to be anywhere rather than there.

At that moment, the phone in his pocket suddenly chirped, informing him of an incoming message.

"—!"





“—!”

That was the signal.

The girl and Origami launched themselves off the ground and clashed right in front of him.

“Eeeeeaaaaaah!”

Shido screamed as the overwhelming blowback flung him up into the air. And then he slammed into a wall and blacked out.



“Status report,” demanded a girl sporting a bright red military jacket draped over the shoulders of a white shirt as she stepped onto the bridge of the warship.

“Commander.” The man waiting next to her saluted neatly, like something out of an army manual.

The young woman called *commander* merely glanced at him and kicked his shins.

“Ungh!”

“Forget the greetings,” she barked, sitting down in the captain’s chair. “Give me a status report.”

The man’s expression had been less agony—more ecstasy. He snapped back to attention. “Yes, ma’am! The Spirit appeared at the same time as the attack began.”

“AST?”

“It appears that way.”

AST. Anti-Spirit Team. Modern wizards clad in mechanical armor, more than human, not quite monsters. They hunted, captured, and killed Spirits. That said, the reality was that even their superhuman abilities didn’t stand a chance. The power of the Spirits was on an entirely different level from anything the AST wielded.

“Ten confirmed on the scene. Currently, only one is attacking.”

“Get me video,” the commander ordered, and a real-time

feed was displayed on the warship's largest monitor.

Two girls were visible in the center of the scene, brandishing massive weapons on a wide road about two blocks away from the shopping district. Each time their blades clashed, beams of light shot out, the ground cracked, and buildings collapsed. It was an impossible sight.

"That AST girl is not too shabby, hmm?" the commander noted. "But, well, she's got no hope up against a Spirit."

"That is indeed the case. But it's also a fact that we are unable to do anything, either."

"..." The commander lifted a foot and jammed the heel of her boot into the top of the man's foot.

"Hngh!"

Ignoring the look of sheer bliss that spread across his face, the commander sighed softly. "I already knew that. I'm getting sick and tired of just sitting back and watching."

"So then, you mean?"

"Yes. Rounds finally gave the go-ahead. We're commencing the operation."

This announcement drew gasps from every member of her crew.

"Kannazuki." The commander leaned back in her chair and slightly raised her right hand, snapping her index and middle fingers up. Almost as if she were asking for a cigarette.

"Yes, ma'am!" The man immediately put a hand in a pocket and pulled out a small piece of candy attached to a stick. He peeled off the wrapper—quickly but neatly. Then he knelt down next to the commander and placed the lollipop stick between her fingers. "Here you are."

The commander thrust the treat into her mouth and flicked the stick back and forth. "Oh, that reminds me. What about the critical *secret weapon*? Didn't answer the phone before. Tell me our weapon managed to evacuate, right?"

"I'll investigate. Here—hmm?" Kannazuki tilted his head to one side.

“What?”

“Oh, there.” He pointed at the screen.

The commander turned her eyes in that direction and then let out a short cry. “Oh!”

A boy in a school uniform was laid out next to the Spirit and the AST member crossing swords.

“Perfect timing. Collect him.”

“Roger that.” Kannazuki bowed at the precisely correct angle once more.

Chapter 2

The Game Begins

It's been a while.

A familiar voice echoed in his mind.

We finally, finally get to meet, XXX.

It was yearning, affectionate.

I'm so happy. But please wait just a tiny bit longer.

Who was it? There was no answer to this question.

I'll never let you go again. I'll never make that mistake again. So—

The mysterious voice cut off there.



“...Ah!” Shido woke up with a gasp. “Whoa!” he shouted.
Of course he did. A strange woman was holding up his

eyelid with a finger, shining a small penlight at his pupil.

"...Hmm? So you're awake." The woman's voice was slow and dreamy, which paired well with her sleepy face.

She was uncomfortably close to him since she appeared to have been checking his eyes while he was unconscious. A pleasant aroma entered his nostrils, perhaps the scent of her shampoo.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-who are you?!"

"...Mm, oh." The woman got up, still looking spaced out, and pushed back the bangs hanging listlessly over her forehead.

Once she stepped back, he was able to take in the whole of her.

She was around twenty, clad in a military uniform. Her hair was tied back artlessly, deep, dark circles adorned her eyes, and for some reason, a battered teddy bear was poking its face out of one of her pockets.

"...I'm Reine Murasame, an analyst here. Unfortunately, the medical officer's not in right now... But you can relax. I don't have a license, but I can perform basic first aid."

"..."

He actually couldn't relax. After all, it was clear that this woman was worse off than he was. She'd been wobbling back and forth this whole time, her head making little circles in the air.

Now in a seated position, Shido zeroed in on something she had said. "*Here?*"

He looked around and found that he had been put onto a simple metal-framed bed with white curtains that created a partition around him. It reminded Shido of the school nurse's office, but the ceiling was a little different, with rough pipes and exposed wires.

"Wh-where is *here*...?"

"...Ohhh, the medical office on *Fraxinus*," she replied. "You were unconscious, so we went ahead and had you brought in."

"Fraxinus...? And wait, unconscious? ...Oh!"

Right. He had passed out after getting dragged into that fight between the mysterious girl and Origami.

"...Uh. Um. Can I ask you a question? There are too many things that I don't understand."

Reine turned her back silently to him without responding.

"Oh... Hey?" said Shido.

"...Follow me," she told him and pulled back the curtain. "There's a person I want you to meet. I'm sure you're dying to get answers, but I'm pretty bad at explaining things. I'll introduce you to someone who can lay it all out for you."

The drapery opened up to a larger room. There were six additional beds and unfamiliar medical instruments farther back.

Reine turned in the direction of what Shido presumed was the exit and staggered toward it. But her feet quickly buckled under her, and she hit her head against the wall with a loud bang.

"A-are you okay?!"

"...Mmph." At least she didn't fall down. She groaned as she leaned against the wall. "Aah, sorry. I haven't gotten much rest lately."

"Wh-when was the last time you slept?" Shido asked, and Reine considered the question before raising three fingers. "Three days ago. No wonder you're sleepy."

"...Oh, I think you mean thirty years?"

"I didn't expect that!" He had been ready to hear a maximum of three weeks as a response, but this answer was indeed a surprise. Plus, the number clearly exceeded the age Reine looked to be.

"...Well, it's true that I can't remember the day I last got some sleep. Seems I've got a touch of insomnia, hmm?"

"I—I guess...?"

"...So. Oh!" She suddenly dug around in a pocket and pulled out a pill case. "Excuse me. Time for my medicine."

She opened the case and tossed every single pill into her mouth.

"Uh, hey!" Shido shouted involuntarily.

Reine crunched, chomped, crushed, and gulped a terrifying number of capsules without any hesitation whatsoever.

"...You're a real live wire, huh?"

"It's just, that was a lot of pills!" he yelped. "And what's the medication for anyway?"

"...They're all sleeping pills."

"You're gonna die! This is serious!"

"...But they're not that strong."

"What is *up* with your body?!"

"...Well, they're sweet and tasty, so it's fine."

"Are you sure that isn't candy?!" he shouted and then let out a sigh.

"...At any rate, this way. Follow me." Reine returned the empty pillbox to her pocket, started walking, her stride still precarious, and opened the door of the medical office.

"Uh!" Shido hurried to put on his shoes and followed her out of the room. "What exactly is this...?"

They stepped into a narrow hallway with pale, mechanical walls and floor. He was somehow reminded of the interior shots of rocket ships in space operas or the hallways of naval vessels in movies.

"...Okay, what were we doing?" Reine paused for a moment before tottering ahead on unsteady feet.

Shido started after her slowly, still not understanding a single thing that was happening. His footsteps echoed in the hall that looked like it was straight out of a movie set.

He couldn't say how long they'd been walking when Reine stopped in front of a door with a small electronic panel next to it at the end of the corridor.

"...Here we are," she announced.

The panel chirped mechanically, and the door slid open.

"...Well, come in." Reine entered, and Shido followed her.

"This is..." He opened his eyes wide at the scene on the other side of the mechanical gateway.

Simply put, it was the bridge of a warship. An elliptical floor spread out from the door Shido had come in through, and set in the middle of it was a chair that seemed to be the captain's seat.

Gently sloping steps stretched out to either side, and he could see the crew operating a set of complicated controls on the deck below. The entire room was dimly lit. The glow of the monitors dotted the room, and the presence of those monitors dominated the space.

"...I brought him," Reine said, her head wobbling in a loop.

"Good work."

The tall, butler-like man standing next to the captain's seat bowed slightly. He had wavy hair and a nose that didn't look particularly Japanese. He was handsome, looking like he'd stepped right out of the pages of a BL novel.

"Hello," he greeted Shido. "I am the vice commander, Kyouhei Kannazuki. It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Uh...huh..." Shido bowed his head slightly as he scratched his cheek.

For an instant, he thought that Reine had been speaking to this Kannazuki, but that was wrong.

"Commander, Analyst Murasame has returned," Kannazuki announced, and the captain's chair slowly turned toward them, squeaking quietly.

"Good to have you. Welcome to Ratatoskr."

The voice was a little too cute to belong to someone with the title of commander.

Once the chair stopped turning, Shido found himself facing a girl clad in a bright red military uniform. Hair tied up with two large black ribbons. Small physique. Eyes round like walnuts. And a Chupa Chups lollipop in her mouth.

Shido knit his brows. No matter how hard he stared, this

was definitely...

"Kotori?" he asked, stunned.

There were a few differences—her outfit, her tone, her entire aura—but this girl had to be his beloved little sister, Kotori Itsuka. No question about it.



"Shido Itsuka." Origami spoke so quietly that no one else could hear her, his face popping up in her mind.

There was no mistake. It had definitely been *that* boy from before. Her memory was not wrong. They'd only met the one time, so it was no wonder he didn't remember her, even though it disappointed her a little. She'd tried all kinds of ways of getting in touch with him since they started high school, but all had ended in failure.

And right now, she was facing a more pressing question.

"What was he *doing* there?"

She didn't understand why he'd been out in the middle of the city when there'd been a spacequake alert. Plus, he had definitely seen everything—both Origami in her special gear and the Spirit.

"Master Sergeant Tobiichi, the preparations are complete!"

"—"

Origami snapped up her head when the mechanic suddenly called down to her.

Then she let the command floating in her mind take shape. The order was conveyed to the thrusters on her back through the combat wiring suit that covered her body to activate the Realizer there. The equipment enveloping her body seemed ill-suited for flight, and yet Origami floated up into the air together with the heavy weapons.

Ground Self-Defense Forces, Tengu Garrison.

Guided by the mechanic in one corner of the hangar,

Origami steered herself onto her own personal dock, landing seated, and finally let out her breath once she had put her weapons away in their set positions and released all the Realizers. At the same time, the weight of the gear—which she hadn't felt at all until that moment—pressed down on her, together with the exhaustion accumulated over the course of the mission.

She heard a mechanical *klik-hiss* from behind, and the connection with the thrusters on her back was released. But she couldn't stand up for another three minutes. It was like this every time after she used the CR unit. Her body always felt abnormally heavy whenever she downgraded from superhuman to human.

Combat Realizer unit. CR unit for short.

It was the name for the miraculous Realizer technology obtained by humanity after the great disaster thirty years ago, equipment used for military purposes. This machinery used computer calculations to distort the laws of physics and recreate these computations in the real world. Although there were limits, Realizers made imagination reality. This technology produced what was essentially magic using scientific methods.

And it was also the sole means by which humanity could resist the Spirits.

"Get back! Stretcher coming through!"

She heard an angry roar from her right. When she glanced over, she saw a platoon member in the same type of wiring suit she wore laid out on a stretcher.

"...Dammit. Dammit...! I am totally going to kill that girl!" The soldier on the stretcher cursed, pressing on a bandage oozing blood on her forehead.

"..."

If the soldier still had it in her to curse, she was probably going to be fine. Origami turned her gaze forward again, disinterested.

As long as a person made it to treatment with a medical

Realizer, they would make a complete recovery, excluding the most severe injuries. When Origami had broken her leg, she'd been able to walk again the next day.

"—"

She let out a slight sigh and looked up, turning the day's battle over in her mind.

A world-killing calamity—the Spirits.

Anomalies that even a group of superhumans like Origami couldn't scratch. *Natural disasters* who appeared out of nowhere and wreaked whatever havoc they pleased.

"..."

Today's fight had only come to an end because the Spirit had been Lost.

Lost didn't mean that the Spirit was dead. She had simply escaped by leaping through space.

Ideally, the Spirit would have retreated thanks to the efforts of the AST. But everyone fighting her on the ground, including Origami, knew that the Spirit didn't view them as any kind of threat. The fact that she was Lost was nothing more than the Spirit's whim.

Origami gritted her teeth tightly, her expression not changing on the surface.

"Origami." A voice came from deep in the hangar to interrupt her thoughts.

"..."

Wordlessly, she turned in that direction. She was still not used to her body; her head was dull and heavy.

When the basic Realizer in the wiring suit was activated, a Territory of several meters was deployed around the wearer. This was the key to the CR unit.

Territory. Just as the word implied, it was a space the user could make into whatever she wanted. It would mitigate any external shock, and even internal gravity could be changed as needed. When the Territory was deployed, Origami and other AST personnel became superhuman. In exchange, for a brief period after using a CR unit, they

were unable to move as they wanted to.

“Nice work.”

A woman who looked to be in her midtwenties stood before her with her hands on her hips, wearing the same wiring suit as Origami. Captain Ryouko Kusakabe, the leader of Origami’s AST squad.

“You went and drove back that Spirit all on your own... I’ll have words with Tomohara and Kagaya. I can’t believe they withdrew and left you alone with that thing.”

“They didn’t withdraw,” Origami stated.

Ryouko shrugged. “It’s got to be like that in the report to the brass. We have to make it seem like we’re getting stuff done, or else they’ll slash our budget.”

“...”

“Don’t make that face at me. I was giving you a compliment. You did great, especially when our ace wasn’t in the game. If you hadn’t been there, we would’ve seen a couple deaths at least. But...it’s just...” She sighed as she narrowed her eyes, grabbed Origami’s head, and turned it toward her. “You’re a bit too reckless. You really want to die that badly?”

Origami held her tongue.





"Do you understand what kind of creatures you're fighting out there? They're monsters. Sentient hurricanes... Listen. We keep the damage to a minimum, and we make it Lost as fast as possible. That's our job. Don't go courting any unnecessary danger."

"No." Origami stared back into Ryouko's eyes and parted her lips slightly. "The role of the AST is to defeat the Spirits."

Ryouko winced. That was true. As an AST captain, she had a much deeper understanding than Origami of the Anti-Spirit Team. She was trying to get through to her junior with her experience: *We can only reduce the destruction.*

Origami spoke once more, fully aware of this fact. "I will defeat the Spirits."

"..." Ryouko let out a sigh and released the girl's head. "I should keep my opinions to myself. You think what you want. But if you go against my orders on the field, you're off the squad."

"Roger," Origami replied briefly before standing up and walking away, her body familiar again at last.



"...So this is called a Spirit, and this is an AST, ground Anti-Spirit Team," Kotori explained. "You got yourself tangled up in a real mess there. If we hadn't recovered you, you probably would've died two or three times by now. Anyway, moving on—"

"H-hang on a minute!" Shido interrupted loudly.

"What? What's wrong? Here you are getting an explanation directly from the commander and everything. You should be choking up with tears at the honor. I'll even let you lick my boots just this once—a real privilege!"

She jerked her chin upward to look down on him as she spat out this line that made her seem very un-Kotori-like.

"R-really?!" Kannazuki cried out joyfully from his position next to her.

She immediately shoved her elbow into his solar plexus. "Not you."

"Hngaaah...!"

Shido opened his mouth, dumbfounded. "...Y-you *are* Kotori, right? You weren't hurt in the attack?"

"Oh my!" She gasped theatrically. "Did you forget what your own sister looks like, *Shido*? I knew you had a terrible memory, but I'm surprised it's gotten this bad. Perhaps I should find a nice seniors' home for you."

A stream of sweat ran down Shido's face. He pinched his cheek to see if he was dreaming. Ow. This wasn't a dream.

But there was no way his adorable little sister would make his first name sound like an expletive like that. He scratched the back of his head.

"My brain's totally fried because there are just too many things that don't make any sense. What are you *doing* here? And, like, what is this place? Who are these people? And—"

"Calm down." Kotori spread out her hands patronizingly to stop her brother's troubled rambling. "If you can't comprehend the other stuff, there'll be no telling you anything."

She pointed at the large screen on the bridge, which still showed the girl with black hair who he had encountered earlier, along with people wearing mechanical armor.

"Umm. A Spirit...? Was that what you said?" Shido asked hesitantly.

A being of unknown origin who appeared at random in their world. He was pretty sure that was how Kotori had explained it.

"Mm-hmm. Normally, she doesn't exist in this world. She just shows up and blows away an entire area, whether we like it or not." Kotori threw her arms out to mimic an explosion. "Boom!"

Shido pressed a hand to his forehead and grimaced. "..."

Sorry. This is a lot to take in. I don't really get it."

"You still don't understand?" She shrugged and sighed. "I'm telling you that the spacequakes are an aftereffect of Spirits like her appearing in our world."

"Wh—?" He unconsciously furrowed his brow.

A shaking of space itself. Spacequakes. The absurd phenomenon eating away at humanity, at the world.

And they were caused by that *girl*?

"Well, there are different scales of magnitude. The small ones are a few meters wide, and the big ones, those are the ones digging holes into continents." Kotori made a large circle with her hands.

They'd called the first one thirty years earlier the Great Eurasian Spacequake.

"You're lucky, Shido. If this explosion had been any bigger, you might have been wiped out along with everything else."

He shivered at the thought. She was exactly right.

She rolled her eyes. "Why did you go outside when there was an alert anyway? Are you stupid? Do you *want* to die?"

"Oh... It's just, I mean, look." He fished his phone out of his pocket and made it display Kotori's position.

Indeed, her icon was still stationary in front of the restaurant.

"Hmm? Ohhh, that." She pulled her own phone out and turned it toward him.

"Uh...? Why are you—? Huh?" Shido looked back and forth between the two phones.

Since she was on this ship, he'd assumed that she'd dropped her phone by the restaurant.

Kotori sighed. "I was *wondering* what you were doing outside during an alarm. So that's why. Exactly how stupid do you think I am, my idiot brother?"

"No, it's just... Uh, I mean, why—?"

"Simple," she said. "We're in front of the restaurant."

"Huh...?"

"This is perfect. It'll be a lot faster just to show you. Cut the filter a sec," she said, and the gloomy bridge grew immediately brighter.

It wasn't that someone had turned the lights on. It was more like a dark curtain hanging over the ceiling had been yanked away. Blue sky spread out all around them.

"Wh-what the...?!"

"Don't freak out," she told him. "You're just seeing what's outside."

"Outside... This?"

"Yes. We're fifteen thousand meters above the city of Tengu. In terms of our position aboveground, we're right around the restaurant where we were supposed to meet."

"So this is..." Shido trailed off.

"Yes. *Fraxinus* is an airship." Kotori crossed her arms and clucked her tongue with satisfaction, like a child showing off her favorite toy. Actually, it was maybe more like an overprotective mother introducing the precious child she'd devoted her life to for the past several years.

"A-an airship...? What? Why would you be—?"

"I *told* you I would explain, right?" she cut him off peevishly. "Even a chicken can retain information longer than you can, I swear."

"Mmph..."

"...But you checking my phone's GPS location... That was a blind spot. I set Invisible and Avoid with the Realizer, so I got careless. I'll have to work out a countermeasure for this later," she muttered, placing her hand on her chin.

"Wh-what are you talking about?"

None of the words she was saying made any sense to him.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I don't expect you to understand. You've got a brain that would lose out to a horsehair crab's if we were talking price per gram."

"..."

"Commander," Kannazuki said gently. "Crab paste is not

the brain. It's a digestive gland."

"..."

Without a word, Kotori gestured for him to come closer. When he bent down, she spat the stick of the now-finished lollipop into his eyes.

"Nngaah!" He fell backward, hands pressed to his face.

"A-are you okay?!" Shido cried out.

This was no joke. He started toward Kannazuki and then stopped again.

Having fallen to the floor, the tall man pulled a handkerchief from his pocket with a look of ecstasy on his face and tidily wrapped it around the lollipop stick Kotori had spat at him.

"Whoops! Did I worry you? It's all right. In our industry, this is a reward!" Kannazuki said and leaped to his feet to stand at perfect attention.

What industry was that? Actually, scratch that. Shido didn't want to know the details.

"Kannazuki."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Kotori held up two fingers, and Kannazuki placed a replacement lollipop there for her.

"So next is...the AST. The specialized troops for the Spirits," Kotori said, indicating a group on the screen.

"...‘For the Spirits’?" Shido asked. "What exactly does that mean?"

"Simple." She looked at him as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "When a Spirit appears, AST race to the area and take care of it."

"Take care of it...?"

"Kill it, essentially!"

"...!"

He gasped, but what she was saying wasn't entirely unexpected. Still, he suddenly felt like someone was squeezing his heart tightly in a vise. "K-kill it...?"

"Yes." She nodded, as if it wasn't a big deal.

He swallowed hard. His heart pounded loudly in his ears. He understood the words coming out of her mouth. Spirits. Yes, indeed, they were dangerous. But no matter how dangerous, killing them was just...

The girl's face suddenly popped up in the back of his mind.

"I mean, didn't you come to kill me, too?"

He finally understood what she had meant. As well as why she looked like she might burst into tears at any second.

"Well, if you think about it," Kotori said, "it's best that they die."

She didn't seem particularly concerned about it.

"Wh-wh-why?" Shido half groaned, screwing up his face.

"What do you mean, 'why'?" She put a hand to her chin, as if deeply engrossed. "There's no 'why' here. They're monsters, y'know? The worst, vilest, deadliest poison. They cause spacequakes just by appearing."

"But you said it yourself, right? The Spirits aren't causing the spacequakes on purpose."

"Yes. At least, the current prevailing view is that the explosions happen regardless of the Spirit's intentions. The damage from duking it out with the AST, though—that could also be counted as spacequake damage, and that *is* the Spirit's doing."

"...But isn't that only because these AST people are attacking?"

"Well, that might be," agreed Kotori. "But that's a guess at best. Maybe the Spirit would happily start trashing the place, even if the AST did nothing."

"That's...not likely."

"And your proof for that?"

"Someone who loves to destroy towns...wouldn't look so

sad.”

This was far too vague and weak to be called *proof*, but for some reason, Shido was completely convinced that it was the truth.

“The Spirit’s not doing it herself, right?” he asked. “But —”

“The big problem isn’t whether it’s deliberate or not,” Kotori cut him off. “Either way, it doesn’t change the fact that the Spirits cause spacequakes. It’s not that I don’t get what you’re trying to say, Shido, but we can’t exactly leave a creature that is nuclear-warhead levels of dangerous to run free just because we feel sorry for her. We got away with a small-scale explosion this time, but you never know when a spacequake on the Eurasia level is going to happen again.”

“But you can’t just...kill them,” Shido persisted.

“For someone who only had a few minutes of contact with one—and that one almost got you killed—you sure do have the Spirits’ back... What, did you fall for her?”

“N-no. It’s just, I was thinking maybe there’s some other way.”

“Okay, tell me then.” She sighed. “What other way is there?”

“I...” He had nothing to say to that.

In his mind, he understood what she was saying. The Spirits were an anomaly that left deep scars in the world just by showing up. A threat like that did need to be dealt with as swiftly as possible.

However, Shido had seen it. Just for an instant, he had seen the girl’s face, and how she seemed ready to burst into tears at any second. He’d heard the sorrow in her voice.

Aah, this is the wrong way to go about this, he’d thought.

“At any rate.” The words came unprompted from his mouth. “You won’t know...until you actually...talk to them just once.”

The terror of death from that moment was still etched into his bones. He was actually petrified. He wanted to run

away. However, he couldn't leave that girl like this. After all, she was *just* like him.

Kotori stretched her lips out into a grin, almost as if to say she'd been waiting for this. "Right. So then we'll help you."

"Huh...?" His jaw dropped.

She threw her arms out, broadly gesturing to Reine, Kannazuki, the crew on the deck below, and the airship *Fraxinus* itself. "I said we'll help you do that. The assembled power of the Ratatoskr organization will be at your disposal, Shido." She locked her fingers together in her lap, looking graceful.

"Wh-what's that? I don't get—"

"I'll answer your first question," she interrupted. "The one about what we are. Listen. There are basically two ways of dealing with the Spirits."

"Two...?"

She nodded exaggeratedly and held up her index finger. "The first is the AST way. Go up against them with battle power and exterminate them."

Next, she brought up her middle finger. "The second is... to speak with the Spirits. We are Ratatoskr, a group formed to resolve the spacequakes through dialogue without killing Spirits."

"..."

Shido's thoughts raced. He had a lot of questions—What was this organization? Why did Kotori belong to it?—but for now, he gave voice to the thing that was most important in that moment.

"...So why are you putting this organization at my disposal then?"

"Actually, it's the other way around," she noted. "Ratatoskr was originally created for you, Shido."

"H-huh...?!" He was more stunned by this than anything else. "Hang on a sec. That makes the least sense of all. For *me*?"

"Mm-hmm. Well, it might be more precise to say the organization has placed you in the position of negotiating with the Spirits to try and resolve the Spirit issue. Either way, we can't even get off the ground without you."

"H-hang on. What do you mean? You're saying that all these people are here for that? And, like, why me?!"

Kotori twirled the lollipop in her mouth. "Mm. Well, you're special."

"That explains nothiiiiiiing!" he shouted, beyond frustrated.

His sister smiled boldly and shrugged. "Well, you'll understand the reason soon enough. It's all good. I'm telling you we're going to have your back with our gadgets and gizmos, mmkay? Or are you going to get between a Spirit and an AST again all on your own with zero prep? Next time, you'll die, y'know," she stated coolly, eyes narrowed.

Shido gulped involuntarily. She was totally right. He had only his ideals and hopes, but no way to turn them into reality. He had so many things he wanted to say that they all piled up in his throat, but he managed to push these many doubts down somehow and voice a question that would move the discussion forward.

"...So what specifically does this 'dialogue' entail?"

"Well, you see..." Kotori's lips curled upward, and she put a hand to her chin. "You're going to make the Spirits...fall in love!"

...A few seconds passed by.

"...Excuse me?" A bead of sweat slid down Shido's cheek as a confident grin remained on his sister's lips. "...Come again? I don't quite get what you mean."

"You get chummy with a Spirit, chat a bit, do some flirting, go on a date, get 'em all starry-eyed," she replied, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"...Umm." He clutched his head in his hands. "And how will that fix the spacequakes?"

"Hmm." She placed a thoughtful finger on her chin. "If we're going to solve the spacequake issue with something other than military power, then basically we have to win the Spirits over, right?"

"I guess."

"The quickest way to do that is to get the Spirits to like this world," she continued. "If they get, like, 'oh, what a wonderful world,' then they won't run wild all over the place."

"Makes sense."

"They say the world looks beautiful when you're in love. So you're gonna date the Spirits and make 'em lovesick!"

"No, that doesn't make sense," Shido said flatly. Kotori was clearly getting ahead of herself. "I—I don't think that's how—"

"Oh, shut up, you drumstick!" She cut him off in a forceful tone that brooked no argument. "Ooh, I can't let the AST kill the Spiiiiiiiiits, there haaaaas to be another waaaaaay, but I don't liiiiiike Ratatoskr's methooods... Is that it? You gotta toughen up, bombardier beetle. What can you do by yourself? Know your place."

"Hnngh..."

"You don't have to love every little bit of this." An evil smile spread across her face. "But if you don't want to kill the Spirits, then you can't really pick and choose here, hmm?"

She was exactly right. With no power and no support, Shido would never be able to talk to that Spirit girl again. The AST method was absolutely out of the question. He was sure that Kotori and her crew had only dangled that in front of him to get him on board. But it was indeed a fact that he had no other choices here.

"...Fine!" He nodded, pained.

"Excellent." She grinned. "Analyzing the data so far, the earliest we can expect another Spirit is in one week. You'll start your training tomorrow."

“Huh?” he muttered, bewildered. “Training...?”



The next day...

Origami suddenly grabbed Shido's hand. “Come.”

“Huh?” he cried out. “Uh, h-hey...”

His chair fell over as Origami dragged him out of the classroom. Tonomachi gaped from behind, while a group of girls started squealing and whispering.

Shido imagined the rumors that would be traveling through the school as he trailed after Origami. He reconciled himself to the inevitable gossip, thinking it was infinitely preferable to being Second Best Couple with Tonomachi.

Tuesday, April 11. The day after Shido's mysterious experience. He still couldn't quite believe it had all been real.

Eventually, he'd been moved to a different room, where some old guy went on and on in great detail about every aspect of the situation he was in. (To be honest, he could barely remember any of this.) Then Shido had to sign all kinds of papers before they finally let him go home. He stepped through the door and dived into bed without bothering with a bath, and before he knew it, it was morning.

He dragged his listless body to school and made it through classes somehow, rubbing his bleary eyes, until the final homeroom ended. And now this.

Origami silently climbed the stairs until she got to the locked door to the roof. Only then did she finally release him.

He could hear the chatter of students heading home, which felt far off in the distance, even though they were less than ten meters away from where everyone was. The space

felt isolated, as though it were entirely cut off from the rest of the school.

"Uh. Umm..." He knew it wasn't what Origami had in mind, but a girl bringing him to a place like this still made him blush. He looked anywhere but at her.

"What were you doing there yesterday?" she asked, with no preamble, looking straight into his eyes.

"Oh," he said. "It looked like my little sister was in town during the alarm, so I went to find her."

"Mm-hmm," she replied without a hint of emotion. "And you found her?"

"Oh! Uh, yeah...I did."

"You did? Good," she said. "You saw me yesterday."

"Y-yeah."

"Don't tell anyone," she instructed, with a force that left no room for argument.

He wondered what kind of reaction he'd get if he said something like, "If you don't want anyone to find out, you'll do what I tell you, right? Heh-heh-heh," with morbid curiosity on his face.

But of course, Shido didn't have the nerve for that. He bobbed his head up and down.

"And not just me. The things you saw yesterday, and everything you heard. It'd be in your best interest to forget all of it."

She had to have been talking about the Spirits.

"...You mean, that girl?"

"..." Origami simply stared at him.

"H-hey...Tobiichi. So, like, who was she?"

He'd heard about the Spirits from Ratatoskr, but he asked anyway.

What he'd been told was, at best, the viewpoint of Kotori's organization. Origami and the others who had actually crossed swords with the mysterious young woman and others like her might have a different way of thinking about them.

"She was a Spirit," Origami replied briefly. "Something I have to defeat."

"...S-so this Spirit is a bad guy...?" He posed this tentative question and got the feeling that Origami was gritting her teeth, albeit ever so slightly.

"My parents died five years ago because of a Spirit."

"...Wh—?" He was at a loss for words at this unexpected reply.

"I don't want that to happen to anyone else."

"...You. Don't..." He put a hand on his chest as if to try and calm the wild pounding of his heart. Another question popped into his mind. "So, like... Is it really okay for you to just tell me this stuff about Spirits? I mean, I know I'm the one who asked, but..."

"..." She stared at him unflinchingly before finally saying, "It's not a problem."

"R-really?"

"As long as you don't tell anyone."

"...And if I did?"

"..." She stopped again for just an instant. "It'd be trouble."

"R-really? Yikes," he said. "I promise I won't tell anyone."

She nodded and then took her eyes off him at last. She turned away and started down the stairs.

"...Heeaah."

Once he could no longer see her back, he leaned against the wall and let out a huge sigh. They'd done nothing but talk, but he'd still felt so nervous about the encounter.

"So her parents died because of the Spirits," he muttered and knocked his head against the wall.

A Spirit was a calamitous being whose very existence threatened to destroy the world. It made sense that there would be casualties.

"...I guess I really have my head in the clouds..."

Origami and Kotori were working under a firm conviction, even if they were coming at the issue from two

different directions.

What about him? Would he be able to snarl and yell in front of Origami the way he had with Kotori the previous day?

“...” He sighed.

He didn’t think what he’d done was wrong, but he had a hard time figuring out his complicated feelings.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!!”

He was about to go down the stairs himself when he heard a girl screaming from the hallway.

“...Wh-what was that?!”

Shido flew down the stairs, taking them two at a time, to find several students clustered in the hallway. He could make out a woman in a lab coat lying facedown on the floor in the middle of the cluster.

“Wh-what’s going on?”

“I—I guess she’s a new teacher... But she suddenly collapsed!” a girl near him replied in a panic.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but at least get the nurse —,” Shido started, and the woman in the lab coat grabbed his leg. “A-aaah?!”

“...You don’t need to worry. I just fell down,” she explained as she slowly raised the face that had been plastered to the floor.

“Y-you...!”

Long bangs, dark circles under the eyes. They were framed by glasses now, but there was no way he would forget such a distinctive look.

“...Mm? Ohhh, you.”

The woman—the Ratatoskr analyst Reine Murasame—sat up, wobbling.

“Wh-what are you doing here...?” he asked.

“...Can’t you tell? I decided to put myself into service here for the time being as a teacher. By the way, my subject is physics, and I’m also the vice homeroom teacher for Year Two, Class Four,” Reine said, showing him the name tag

attached to the front of her lab coat. A battered bear peeked out from the breast pocket immediately above it.

"How should I know?!" Shido shouted and realized that he was the one getting all the looks now. "Oh... I—I guess she's okay," he announced, reaching out and helping Reine to her feet.

"...Mm, thanks."

"Don't mention it. But how about we walk and talk?" he said, a little anxious about the group of onlookers. He tottered along, matching Reine's pace. "Umm, Analyst Murasame?"

"...Mm, yeah, Reine's fine."

"Huh?"

"...I'll call you by your first name, too. Coordination and cooperation are born of trust, after all." She nodded in agreement with herself and looked at his face. "Umm, you're... Was it Shintaro?"

"You only got the first bit right!" he cried. If they didn't have trust, they didn't have anything.

"...So, Shin, then. To get to the point—"

"You're just switching subjects?! And, like, don't give me weird nicknames!" he shouted, entirely vexed.

Reine continued as though she hadn't even heard him. "...The preparations for the intense training Kotori was talking about yesterday are complete. You have impeccable timing. I was just looking for you. We can go straight to the physics prep room."

Shido gave up on any snarky reply, since it would be pointless no matter what he said. He let out a sigh. "So what exactly is this training, umm, Reine?"

"...Mm-hmm. Kotori told me you've never dated a girl, Shin. Is this true?"

Why does my dear sister have to spill the details of her big brother's (nonexistent) history with women to a stranger?

Shido assented vaguely, grimacing in annoyance.

“...I’m not reproaching you here or anything,” she told him. “It’s perfectly fine to be chaste. Just not if you’re going to be seducing Spirits.”

“Hngh...,” Shido groaned and then spotted something strange as they were passing the teachers’ room. “...Huh?”

“...Something wrong?”

“No, it’s just...”

His homeroom teacher, Tama, was walking up ahead, with a tiny, somehow familiar shadow trailing behind her, hair tied back in two bunches.

“Ah!” The shadow must have noticed his gaze, because its face lit up. “My dear brotherrrrrrrrrr!” And that small shadow was Kotori.

She crashed into Shido’s stomach like it had its own gravity.

“H-Haggar...!” he groaned.

“Ha-ha-ha! Silly rabbit! Haggar? That’s the mayor of Metro City! Ha-ha-ha!”

“K-Kotori...?! Why are you at my high school...?!” Shido somehow managed to peel his clingy sister off his midsection.

“Oh, Itsuka.” Tama stepped out from behind Kotori. “I was just about to call you over the PA because your sister’s here.”

“Uh... Uh-huh...”

When he looked closely, he saw that Kotori was wearing the slippers reserved for school visitors and had a visitor badge pinned to her junior high uniform. She had apparently followed all the proper procedures before entering.

“Aah, thanks, miss!” Kotori waved her hand vigorously.

“You’re very welcome.” His teacher grinned in return. “Aah, your sister’s so adorable.”

“Uh...sure.” Shido forced a smile, sweat beading on his forehead, and offered a noncommittal reply.

“Bye-bye!” Tama and Kotori smiled and waved at each

other, and then his teacher walked off toward the teachers' room.

"...So, Kotori."

"Hmm? Whaaat?" she said, eyes wide. This was the usual little sister Shido knew only too well.

"Um... About that thing yesterday—with the whole Ratatoskr and the Spirits and—"

"We can talk about that later."

Although her tone was no different from usual, Shido felt an indescribable force for some reason and fell silent.

"...That was fast, Kotori." Reine's quiet voice came from behind him.

"Yeah, I got *Fraxinus* to pick me up on the way."

Even though she said they would talk later, she was sure tossing the name of the ship around like it was nothing. Shido pressed a hand to his forehead, feeling like her logic made no sense.

Kotori watched this with a blithe smile before starting down the hallway, tugging on his hand as if to lead him. "Anyway, look. Let's hurry it up."

"Uhhh... Hey, I get it. Don't run."

Apparently, it was his day for getting dragged around by women.

They came to stand in front of their destination: the physics prep room on the fourth floor of the east building.

"Wohkay. Let's go inside! Inside! ♪"

"Don't make it into a Disney song," he grumbled as he opened the sliding door—and then immediately frowned and rubbed his eyes. "...Hey."

"...What's up?" Reine raised an eyebrow.

"What *is* this room?" he asked.

Students didn't generally go into the physics prep room, and Shido had no idea what it was supposed to look like. But he was sure that *this* was no physics prep room because his field of view was filled with computers and displays and all kinds of devices he'd never seen before.

“...It’s for the equipment?”

“Aah, why do you sound so unsure?!” Shido shouted. “And, like, this is supposed to be the physics prep room, right? What happened to the teacher who was in charge of it before?!”

This would originally have been the only safe haven outside of the bathroom for the kind and inconspicuous aging physics teacher Shoichi Chosokabe (nickname: Natural-Born Invisible Man). But Chosokabe was currently nowhere to be seen.

“...Ohhh, him? Hmm.” Reine put a hand to her chin and nodded slightly.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

A few seconds passed.

“...Well, we’re not getting anything done just standing here. Go inside.”

“What were you going to say?!”

He felt like he could actually feel the breeze as Reine zoomed right over his question. Her powers of unobservation were tremendous, a skill that all modern Japanese people should absolutely acquire.

Reine went into the room ahead of Shido and sat down in a chair placed toward the back.

Kotori slipped by him and let down the hair tied up with white ribbons in a practiced movement before tying it back up with black ones she pulled out of her pocket.

“Phew,” she said.

He felt like her entire vibe changed.

She loosened the collar of her uniform languidly and threw herself down in a chair near Reine. Then she pulled what looked like a small binder out of her bag. Inside, a variety of Chupa Chups were set in neat rows. Incredibly, it was a special lollipop case.

She selected one and put it in her mouth before turning a contemptuous gaze on Shido, who was still standing in the doorway.

"How long are you going to stand there? You trying to be a scarecrow? Quit it. With your idiot face, I doubt you could even chase away a single bird. Aah, but it's just so creepy that it might ward off people."

Shido looked at his little sister, instantly transformed into some kind of imperious queen, and put a hand to his forehead. So was the changing of the ribbons some kind of mentality switch? Like turning over a piece in Othello, a magnificent Jekyll and Hyde.

"Kotori, which one's the real you...?"

"That's a nasty way of putting it," she said. "You'll never get girls chasing you like that... Ohhh, so *that's* why you're still a virgin. I'm sorry for pointing out the obvious."

"...Hey."

"Statistically speaking," she continued, "more than half of all men who don't date a woman before the age of twenty-two remain virgins their whole lives."

"I've still got more than five years! Don't underestimate future me!"

"'I'll do it tomorrow' is the go-to excuse for people who are stuck on the idea that they have infinite time and options."

"Hngh..."

Realizing that he couldn't win this argument, he let it go with a grunt and closed the door.

"...So anyway, Shin. Let's start your training. Sit down here," Reine instructed, gesturing to a chair set up between the two women.

"...Fine." He sat down in the chair as told, knowing full well that it would be pointless to complain further.

"Now, we'll just get right to the discip—*koff-koff*, training," Kotori said.

"You were going to say discipline, huh?"

"All in your head... Reine."

"...Uh-huh." Reine recrossed her legs. "Whatever your actual intentions, you're going to need to be able to do one thing—the bare minimum—as long as you're going to be working with us."

"And that is...?" Shido asked.

"...It's simple, really. You have to get used to dealing with girls."

"Dealing with...girls?"

"...Uh-huh." Reine nodded. She looked like she was about to nod off to sleep right there. "Conversation is essential in getting the subject to let her guard down and start to feel fondness for you. We can instruct you in what to do and say. But if you're too nervous, we're not going to be able to get anywhere."

"Conversing with girls?" he asked. "I can manage that much."

"I wonder." Kotori suddenly shoved his head up against Reine's chest.

"...Ngh?!"

"...Hmm?" said Reine.

A warm, soft sensation accosted his cheeks, while a scent so good it threatened to melt his brain tickled his nostrils. He immediately removed Kotori's hand and jerked his face up.

"Wh—?! Wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you *doing*?!"

"Huh. No good at all." Kotori scoffed and shrugged. "I knew it. This plan'll be dead in the water before we even begin if something so simple sends your heart rate through the ceiling."

"Your example here is clearly bananas!" Shido cried.

Kotori wasn't interested in hearing what he had to say. She shook her head in exasperation. "You're such a hopeless virgin that it's actually sad. Ugh. Honestly. Do you think it's cute or something?"

"Sh-shut up," he stammered.

“...Well, it’s fine. That’s why we’re here, after all,” Reine said and crossed her arms.

This naturally emphasized her impressive bust. It was more like her chest was resting on her arms.

“...Ngh!” Shido was suddenly embarrassed to look directly at her, and he averted his eyes.

Training to get used to dealing with girls.

The words cut through his mind. They were going to make it so he wouldn’t get flustered in erotic situations... and stuff. But what exactly were they going to do to him?

“Drooling, huh? Disgusting.” Kotori narrowed her eyes at him as she set her elbows on the desk.

“...! Th-that’s not it!” he protested. “I—I wasn’t—”

“...Well, how about we just get started then?” Reine interrupted and pushed her glasses up.

“Oka—W-wait, I’m not mentally prepared!” Shido straightened up, his voice shaking from nerves.

“...Mm.” Ignoring this, Reine leaned in toward him.

This abrupt movement got his heart pounding far harder than before.

Aah, what? What exactly is she going to do to me...?!

Pulse racing, he couldn’t move. He squeezed his eyes shut, looking entirely like the protagonist of a shojo manga from the ’80s.

No matter how long he waited, nothing happened.

When he cracked his eyes open, Reine was turning on the monitor on the desk.

“Huh...?”

The word *Ratatoskr* appeared on the screen in a cute design. Next, beautiful girls with brightly colored hair popped up on-screen, a cheery pop song playing in the background. The title “Fall in Love: My Little Shido” bopped around.

“Wh-what’s this?” he asked warily.

“...Mm-hmm. It’s a romance simulation game.”

“A dating sim?!” he shrieked.

"Ugh, what did you think we were gonna do?" Kotori asked. "Geez, someone let their imagination go wild. Gross."

"No. I—I just..." he stammered and then cleared his throat and got his heartbeat under control.

"I—I was just wondering if this counts as training."

Kotori stared at him silently, like she was witness to something truly disgusting.

He wished she would say something at least. The cold shoulder was hard to bear.

"...Oh, don't be that way," Reine told him. "This is the first step in your training. And it isn't some retail game. It was created by the director of Ratatoskr. It provides realistic recreations of situations that could actually happen in real life. It should prepare you mentally at least. Also, it's aged fifteen and up."

"Ohhh. So it's not rated R," he observed, for no particular reason.

Kotori gave him a look that was very near pity. "Ugh. The worst."

"...Shin, you're sixteen, right?" Reine scratched her head. "You can't actually play an R-rated game."

"Hey, isn't there a bit of a contradiction with what you two were saying before?!" he cried.

Kotori and Reine appeared intent on ignoring him.

"...Mm, well, just...get to it."

"Yeah, yeah. Fine...!"

Finding the whole thing hard to swallow, he took the controller he was given, all the while wondering what he had done in this life to deserve this punishment, forced to play a dating sim with his little sister and a teacher watching.

He skimmed the protagonist's monologue and proceeded with the game. And then the screen went dark for an instant.





* * *

"GOOD MORNING, MY DEAR BROTHER! IT'S NICE OUT AGAIN!"

The screen filled with beautiful graphics as this line chirped out of the speakers. He was looking at a small girl depicted from a low angle. So this was the protagonist's little sister then.

She was stepping on the sleeping protagonist.

And her underwear was on full display.

"Heeeeeeeeeey!!" Shido shouted, clutching the controller.

"...What's wrong, Shin?" Reine asked. "Problem?"

"Uh, didn't you say that this was a recreation of something that could actually happen?!"

"...I did. Is this weird?"

"Not just weird! There's no way something this ridiculous would...ever...", he started, and then sweat beaded on his forehead. He felt like he'd had an experience very much like this one just yesterday.

"...What?"

"Nothing. Never mind." Shido returned to the game, feeling like the whole thing was incredibly absurd. When he pressed the NEXT button, a square of text appeared in the middle of the screen. "Hmm? What's this?"

"Options. You select what the protagonist should do. Your choice will make her affection toward you go up or down, so be careful," Kotori explained, pointing at the bottom right of the screen. Shido saw a gauge there with the cursor at the zero position.

"Hmm. I get it. So I just have to pick one of these, right?" Shido shifted his eyes from the affection meter to his options.

(1) "MORNING, MY BELOVED LILIKO." YOU HUG YOUR SISTER

LOVINGLY.

(2) "I'M UP. AND SO IS SOMETHING ELSE." YOU DRAG YOUR SISTER INTO THE BED.

(3) "GOT YOU, JERK!" YOU GRAB THE FOOT OF YOUR SISTER STANDING ON YOU AND GET HER IN AN ACHILLES LOCK.

"...What's up with these choices?! How is this real?! I've never done any of these things!"

"Whatever," Kotori said. "But there *is* a time limit."

"Huh...?!" He caught sight of the number displayed beneath the choices steadily dropping.

"Fine," he half groaned and selected (1), the least ridiculous of his options.

"MORNING, MY BELOVED LILIKO."

I HUG MY LITTLE SISTER LOVINGLY.

LILIKO INSTANTLY GETS A LOOK OF DISDAIN ON HER FACE AND SHOVES ME AWAY.

"UH... COULD YOU QUIT THAT? IT'S CREEPY."

The affection meter dropped to minus fifty.

"That was too realistic!" Shido cried, slamming the controller into his lap.

"Aaah, you dummy," Kotori scolded. "She might be your little sister, but that's obviously going to happen if you randomly hug her... Honestly. I know this is a game, but if this were the real deal, you'd have a hole ripped clean out of your stomach, y'know."

"So then what I am supposed to do here?!" he shouted at the sheer absurdity of it all, but she had no interest in bantering.

Letting out an exasperated sigh, she turned on the display in front of her.

"Uh? What are you doing?"

"I know this is just training, but I'm gonna need you to feel like there's actually a lot riding on this," she told him.

A familiar scene was displayed on the screen. The entrance to Raizen High. An old guy wearing the school uniform was standing in the camera's line of sight.

"What's with him?" Shido asked.

"One of our crew," Kotori said, before pulling a mic out of nowhere and starting to speak. "It's me. Shido chose wrong. Go ahead and do it."

"*Yes, ma'am!*" The man on-screen bowed.

"Huh...? D-do what?" Shido frowned as the man on the screen pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. He showed it to the camera.

The moment Shido set eyes on it, he thought his heart would stop. "Th-that's—"

"Exactly." Kotori smiled, appearing pleased at his reaction. "The poem you wrote influenced by manga when you were young, 'Étude for a Corrupt World.'"

"Wh—?! Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-why is that —?!"

It was indeed the poem he had written in his notebook in junior high. Hadn't he thrown it out before he started high school because it was too embarrassing?

"Heh-heh. I fished it out of the garbage. I figured it'd come in handy one day."

"Wh-wh-wh-what are you going to do with it...?!"

"Do it," Kotori instructed, grinning.

"*Yes, ma'am!*" the man replied briefly and then folded the poem up neatly and tossed it into a nearby shoe cubby.

Now the students would read the poem Shido had poured his soul into when they came to school the next day!

"Wh—?! What are you doing?!"

"Nothing to get all worked up about," Kotori told him.

"Geez, pathetic. You mess up handling a Spirit, and you won't get off this easy. Of course, you'll take damage, but it's possible we'll take a hit, too... So I set some penalties for you to get a sense of what's involved here."

"This is too muuuuuuch!" shouted Shido. "Plus, I'm the only one suffering here!"

Reine put a hand to her chin thoughtfully. "...I see. Shin does make a point."

"...! R-right?!" His face lit up at the arrival of this unexpected lifeline.

"...So then when Shin makes the wrong choice, we'll take a penalty, too." She started to take off her lab coat.

"Hey! What are you doing?!"

"...Oh, didn't you just say it's not fair that you're the only one embarrassed here? Then, whenever you make the wrong choice, I'll take off a piece of clothing," she said and crossed her arms, not looking particularly embarrassed at all.

"That's not what I meannnnnnnt!"

"I don't care." Kotori kicked his chair impatiently. "Just go. Move forward."

Still looking like he was about to cry, Shido resigned himself to his fate and turned back to the screen. If these were the kinds of options that were going to pop up, he doubted he would be able to get any of them right.

"...Hey, Kotori," he said. "For future reference, is it okay if I try all these options?"

"Whoa! You're such a chicken! And greedy, too! Pathetic."

"Sh-shut up! I've never done this before, so let me have this!"

"You're beyond help. Just this once. Okay, so save."

"O-okay..."

Once he had saved the game, he reset it and went back to his initial set of options. He glared at the choices sternly. He still was convinced they were all bad. He couldn't

imagine her affection toward him would go up with (3), so left with no other choice, he selected (2).

"I'M UP. AND SO IS SOMETHING ELSE."

PULLING MYSELF UP ROUGHLY, I DRAG LILIKO INTO THE BED AND POUNCE ON TOP OF HER.

"AH...! WH-WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

"WHAT ELSE WAS I SUPPOSED TO DO? IT'S YOUR FAULT THIS HAPPENED, LILIKO."

"!! NO! STOP IT! NOOOOOOOO!"

"IT'S FINE; RELAX. IT'S ALL GOOD; IT'S FINE."

The screen went dark.

The rest of the story played out in mere seconds. The little sister breaking down in tears. The father beating the protagonist to a bloody pulp. The sound of handcuffs clicking together. The protagonist chuckling, alone in a dark room.

A sad song played over these graphics, and the credits began to roll.

"What the hell is thiiiiiiiiis?!" Shido shouted, at his wit's end.

"That's the only logical outcome, you sex offender," Kotori sneered.

"So then three is the right answer?!"

Shido reset the game, returned to his initial set of choices once more, and selected (3).

"GOT YOU, JERK!"

I YANK UP MY SISTER'S FOOT AND TRY TO GET HER IN AN ACHILLES LOCK.

HOWEVER.

"TOO SLOW."

SHE TWISTS AWAY, ESCAPES MY HAND, GOES AROUND TO MY BACK,

SEIZES MY LEG, AND GETS ME IN A SHARPSHOOTER HOLD.

“GOUF...?!”

The protagonist is partially paralyzed because of this injury, forced to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. And then on to the ending of the game.

“So this means one is the right answer?!” he yelped. “And no normal little sister would know techniques like that, you know!”

“Hmm.” Kotori yanked on his collar and had no sooner thrown him to the floor than she was grabbing his leg and putting him in a sharpshooter hold.

“Lesch...?!” he whined.

“Hmph. ‘Lesch,’ he says. Go ahead and cry for your mommy.” She sniffed and then released him.

“Wh-where did you learn that trick—?”

“It’s the art of being a lady,” she said crisply.

Shido’s image of a lady shifted to a muscular pro wrestler.

“Y-y—! So then how am I actually supposed to get this one right?”

“Honestly. So now you’re even going to ask the examiner for the answer? Pathetic.”

Even as she spoke, she was taking the controller from Shido. She reset the game and advanced to the same place as before. And then she stared silently at the screen without selecting any of the options.

“What are you doing?” he asked. “If you don’t hurry and pick—”

The number displayed below the choices dropped to zero.

“MM... TEN MORE MINUTES...”

“NO! YOU HAVE TO GET UP!”

This extremely normal conversation was displayed on the screen.

“Wh—?” He gasped.

“Why would you pick any of those dumb choices? Is something wrong with your head?” Kotori snorted and gave him back the controller. “I’m giving you special permission to play through the rest, so hurry up. Penalties start again with the next choice.”

“Hngh...! Guh...” Shido gripped the controller, overwhelmed by the absolute nonsensicalness of the entire situation.

When he clicked ahead, a female teacher boasting a hundred-centimeter bust appeared on the screen. This was already deeply unrealistic, but he said nothing and kept the story moving forward.

“EEK!”

The teacher cried out and tripped over nothing, falling onto the protagonist so that his face ended up pressed to her chest.

This time, Shido threw the controller onto the desk.

“This doesn’t happen! I mean...,” he said. Sweating once more, he sadly picked up the controller. He felt like the situation was different but somehow similar to before.

“What’s wrong, Shido?” Kotori asked.

“...It’s nothing.”

Obediently, he began to play again.

Another set of options appeared.

(1) “IF YOU DO THIS KIND OF THING TO ME...I’M GOING TO END UP FALLING FOR YOU.” YOU EMBRACE HER ABRUPTLY.

(2) “OH, GLOBULAR GODDESS!” YOU GRIP HER CHEST

FORCEFULLY.

(3) “YOU’RE WIDE OPEN!” YOU MOVE INTO A JUDO ARMLOCK.

Once again, he could not believe that any of them were remotely probable.

“R-right!”

He clenched a hand into a fist. This had to be the same thing as the last time. He waited until the timer beneath the choices ran out, and indeed, new text appeared on the screen.

“...EEEEEEK! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?! PERVERT! HELP! HE’S GROPING ME!”

The teacher shrieked, and her affection meter dropped down to minus eighty.

“Why?!” Shido screamed.

Kotori shook her head in exasperation. “The obvious outcome if you don’t even try to move out of the way and just enjoy the sensation of her breasts.”

“So then what was I supposed to do?!”

“Didn’t you read the text before the choices? She’s the girls’ judo team coach, Chimatsuri Goshogawara. You had to get her to stop thinking about her breasts by bringing in a pinning technique and making her think about fighting.”

“How am I supposed to know thaaaaat?!” he wailed.

“...Well, a failure’s a failure. Do it.”

“Yes, *ma’am!*” The man on the screen pulled another piece of paper out of his pocket and showed it to the camera.

Shido saw a bad drawing of a character with detailed specifications written next to it.

“Th—! That’s...!”

“Uh-huh. A reference sheet for the original character you created way back when.”

“Hngaaaaaaaah?!”

Ignoring Shido’s shriek, the man once again chucked the paper into a random shoe cubby.

“Stop! Stop! Stooooooooooooopppppp!” Shido begged, clutching his head in his hands, while Reine began to squirm around. “...Reine!”

He’d forgotten. She had said she would take off an article of clothing every time he got a penalty. He was a healthy teenager, so he’d have been lying if he said he wasn’t pleased, but...it was still...concerning.

Fortunately, she was wearing plenty of clothing. So long as he didn’t pick wrong again, he was—

“...Hmm.” Reine reached a hand around behind her, and he heard a snap. She stuck her hand down her shirt, wriggled around, and produced her bra out from her collar.

“Why would you start *there*?!” Shido cried.

“...Is that a problem?” she asked with a tilt of her head.

“No, I mean, the order is clearly all wrong! And you don’t have to take anything else off!”

“...Hmm? But isn’t that unfair? I can totally keep going —”

“You actually just want to flash us, don’t you?!” Shido yelled, and Kotori kicked his chair again.

“It doesn’t matter. Hurry up. Look, the next character,” she said, indicating the screen.

“Hngh...!”

With no other choice, Shido started to play again.

This time, a girl who looked like she was a classmate collided with the protagonist as he turned a corner in the hallway. She flew back onto the floor, legs splayed so that her underwear was on full display.

“—! No way!!” he exclaimed, clenching his hand into a fist as he dug through his own memories. “This! This definitely would never happen!!”

“...Really? I think this sort of thing happens more often than you think,” Reine said, but he had definitely never encountered anything remotely like this, and he shook his head with certainty.

And got another kick to his chair.

“The point of the game isn’t to whine about how it could never happen,” Kotori told Shido and started punching buttons on the computer in front of her. “Do it right. Next time you mess up, this is what you get.”

“Uh?” Shido frowned as a video was displayed on the screen.

The scene was his own bedroom. And he was standing in it, naked from the waist up.

“What...is this...?” The color drained from his face.

"Secret technique! Instant flash boooomb!"

The Shido on-screen clapped his hands together and dropped his hips before thrusting his hands out in front of him.

“Yes. A video of—Heh-heh!” Kotori told him, laughter spilling out of her, a look of the greatest pleasure on her face. “When little Shido was home by himself—Pft! When you were practicing your original killer technique in your room.”

“Noo—!” he screamed louder than he had all day. “Kotori! You can’t! This is where I draw the line!”

“Heh-heh! Then you better succeed with your next choice, huh? Oh, and if you give up halfway through, I’ll post this online.”

“...Ngh.”

On the verge of tears, Shido picked up the controller.

Chapter 3

Your Name...

“Ha! Suck it!” Controller in his left hand, Shido made a fist with his right and punched at the air.

It had been ten days since he’d started Kotori and Reine’s after-school enrichment training program, and Shido had finally made it to the game’s happy ending.

Although I don’t want to count how many old wounds got reopened along the way.

“...Mm, well, it took a bit of time,” Reine said. “But we’ll say you’ve cleared the first hurdle.”

“Well, you *did* get all the cut scenes, so maybe that’s a passing mark. But at best, that’s still just with a girl on a screen.”

Kotori sighed, watching the end credits.

“So then next up is...a real girl—flesh and blood. We’re pressed for time here,” she remarked.

“...Hmm, I wonder if he’ll be okay,” Reine mused.

“It’s fine. Even if he fails, the only thing that’s lost is his social reputation.”

“Wait. How could you be so nonchalant about that?” Shido interjected, annoyed.

“Ugh. Were you eavesdropping? In poor taste, as always. You voyeur. You Peeping Tom.” Kotori frowned and put a hand to her mouth.

Two insults that transcended decades.

"You're talking right in front of me," he cried. "How is that eavesdropping?!"

"Now, now." Kotori spread out her hands placatingly. She made him feel like he was the weird one. "So then, Shido. About the next part of your training."

He sighed. "I'm reluctant to ask, but what is it?"

"Right," she said. "Who would be good?"

"Uh?" Next to him, Reine started plugging away at the console before her. Video feeds from within the school appeared on the displays lined up on the desk.

"...Let's see. How about her for an easy start?" Reine pointed at Tama, the teacher on the right edge of a screen.

Kotori raised her eyebrows, and an evil smile quickly crept across her face. "Ohhh, I get it. Sounds good. Let's go with her."

"...Shin. We've decided on what you'll be doing next."

"Wh-what is it?" Shido asked, trying to ward off the anxiety that welled up in his heart.

"...When you're out in the field for real when a Spirit appears," Reine told him, "we'll give you an earpiece, and you'll follow our instructions. And right now, we're going to do some training to simulate what you'll experience during an actual mission."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"...Seduce Tamae Okamine," she replied immediately.

"Huh?!" he shouted.

"You got a problem with that?" Kotori grinned, as though enjoying his reaction.

"A huge problem!" he yelled. "I—! I can't do that!"

"You'll have to tackle something even more difficult on the big day, y'know."

"W-well, yeah, maybe, but...!"

Reine mussed her hair. "...I think she's ideal for your first target. If you tell her you're in love with her and ask her out, I'm guessing she'll turn you down. And she won't go

blabbing it all over the place... Well, if you're totally against her, we can go with one of the students."

"Unh...!"

A wretched scene flooded in Shido's mind. A girl calling over her clique when she returned to the classroom after her conversation with Shido:

"Get a load of this! Itsuka just asked me out."

"What? Really? He always looks like he doesn't have any interest in girls, but I guess he gets out there, huh?!"

"But he's a total no-go."

"Oh yeah, no way. He seems like he's got a dirty mind."

"Oh, totally! Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

And so, Shido would have a new trauma to catalog in his collection.

He didn't even get a single hint of that happening with Tamae. She might look incredibly young, but she was an adult woman. Her student's nonsense would go in one ear and out the other.

"So what'll it be?" Kotori snapped. "Since failure on the big day means certain death, we're going to make you do a practice run at least once, either way."

"...The teacher, please," he replied, sweat trickling down his back.

"...Wohkay." Reine pulled a small device out of a desk drawer and handed it to him. Then she set what looked to be a communication device with a mic and headphone on the desk.

"What's this?"

"...Put it in your ear."

He stuffed it in his right ear as instructed.

"...*How's this sound?*" Reine picked up the mic and murmured, "*Can you hear me?*"

"Whoa?!"

When her voice suddenly rang in his head, Shido jerked his shoulders upward and jumped back.

"...*Good. Am I coming through loud and clear? Is the*

volume all right?"

"Y-yeah... Well, I guess..."

Reine immediately picked up the headset from the desk and placed it over her ears. "...Hmm. Mm. No problem here, either. I'm picking you up."

"Huh? You're getting my voice now? This thing doesn't look like it has a mic, though..."

"...The earpiece is equipped with a highly sensitive parabolic mic," she told him. "It automatically eliminates noise and only sends me the necessary audio. Real quality machine."

"Uh-huh..." Shido nodded in admiration.

Kotori picked up another small device from the desk and flicked it with a finger. *Ping!* It buzzed up into the air like an insect.

"Wh-what is that?"

"...Watch," Reine instructed and pulled up a video feed on the screen in front of her.

He saw the physics prep room where they were sitting. "This..."

"...Super-small, super-sensitive camera," she said. "We'll follow you with it. Don't mistake it for a bug and squash it."

"Huh... That's amazing."

Bam! He got a kick in the butt.

"It doesn't matter," Kotori said. "Just hurry up and go, you soft-shelled turtle. Target's in the third-floor hallway of the east building. Close by."

"...Fine," Shido assented helplessly, realizing it was pointless to say anything further.

If he dawdled, they might end up choosing another girl to be his target. Pushing himself to his feet, he somehow managed to get himself out of the physics prep room.

He went down the stairs, looked both ways, and saw Tamae's back to him in the hallway.

"Miss—" He cut himself off. She was close enough that she would hear him if he called out, but he wanted to avoid

drawing the attention of any other students and teachers still at school. "...Ugh. Fine."

Shido trotted after her. He'd gone a few meters when she apparently heard his footsteps behind her and turned around.

"Oh! Itsuka? Is something the matter?"

"...Uh. Um," he stammered. Even though he saw her face almost every day, the fact that it had suddenly become a target for seduction made him extremely nervous.

"Calm down." Kotori's voice echoed in his ear. *"This is training. You won't die if you mess up."*

"You say that, but," he half groaned.

"Hmm? What was that?"

"Oh! Nothing..."

"Pathetic." The voice came through his earpiece again, perhaps because Kotori was impatient with Shido and his inability to move the conversation along. *"Anyway, compliment her. That's safe."*

He examined Tamae from head to toe, looking for something to compliment.

But wait. He felt like that how-to book he'd been forced to read the other day had said something about how directly complimenting a woman's appearance seemed to suggest an ulterior motive. It was better to compliment her clothing or accessories and acknowledge her fashion choices. Resolving himself, he opened his mouth.

"B-by the way, your outfit...is very cute."

"Huh...? I-it is? Ha-ha, now I'm blushing." Tamae's cheeks flushed with happiness, and she scratched the back of her head as she flashed him a smile.

Hmm? This might be a good reaction. Shido clenched his hand slightly. "Yes, it really looks great on you!"

"Hee-hee, thank you. It's a favorite of mine."

"Your hairstyle is also really great!"

"What? Really?"

"Yes. And those glasses, too!"

"Oh. Ha-ha-ha-ha..."

"That attendance ledger is also supercool!"

"Um... Itsuka?" The smile on Tamae's face gradually became pained and then bewildered.

"You went too far, idiot. You moron."

He heard Kotori's exasperated voice in his ear, but he didn't know what to say after the compliments. He paused for a moment.

"Umm... Can I help you?" Tamae looked at him curiously.

"...You're out of options here. Just say exactly what I tell you."

The words came sleepily. No doubt, Reine and Kotori thought Shido didn't have much time left.

This was a relief. Shido tilted his head forward slightly to indicate his agreement. And then without thinking at all, he parroted all the words he heard in his ear.

"Um, Ms. Okamine?"

"What is it?"

"I really love coming to school lately."

"Oh, you do? Well, that's great."

"Yes... Because you're my homeroom teacher."

"What...?" Tamae opened her eyes wide in surprise, although it was clear from her face that she was not displeased. "What are you talking about? Oh, you! Where's this coming from all of a sudden?"

He continued to speak Reine's words. "The truth is, for a while now, I've liked—"

"Oh no... That's not okay. I appreciate your feelings, but I'm your teacher." Tamae smiled, pained, waving the attendance ledger.

She was indeed a teacher and a grown woman, and she was intent on making this very clear.

"...Hmm. How to attack here." Reine sighed, after continuously murmuring a script for Shido to follow. *"I'm pretty sure she's twenty-nine this year. Shin, try saying this."* She fed him his next line.

"I'm serious." Shido moved his mouth without really thinking at all. "I seriously want—"

"Umm, I wish you wouldn't."

"I seriously want to marry you!"

Tamae's face tightened slightly at the word *marry*. Then after a brief silence, she squeaked out, "Really?"

"Uh...! Y-yes... Well." He faltered at the sudden change in his teacher's mood.

She abruptly took a step forward and grabbed his sleeve. "Really? Once you're old enough to get married, Itsuka, I'll already be over thirty. Is that all right? Will you come meet my parents? Would you be okay taking my last name? Will you take over my family business once you graduate from high school?"

Tamae closed in on him, breathing raggedly, her eyes shining like she was an entirely different person.

"Uh... Um, Ms. Okamine?" Shido said tentatively.

"...*Hmm, worked a little too well,*" Reine observed.

"Wh-what do you mean?" he whispered in reply, quietly so that Tamae couldn't hear him.

"...*Oh, marriage is like a magic spell for a single, twenty-nine-year-old woman. She's getting anxious, with all her friends starting families, her parents are hassling her, and she's about to cross over into her thirties, which she never thought would happen... Even so, this is a little extreme,*" Reine observed, an unusual note of uncertainty bleeding into her voice.

"Th-that's all fine and good, but what am I supposed to do?!"

"Say, Itsuka, are you free right now?" Tamae asked, sidling up to him. "You're not old enough to apply for a marriage license, so how about we do a blood oath? We'll borrow a chisel from the art room. It's all right. I'll do it so it doesn't hurt."

Shido shrieked.

"*Aah, this is starting to get annoying. No need to get*

involved any further,” Reine told him. “You completed the objective, so just apologize and get out of there.”

Shido gulped hard and opened his mouth. “I-I’m sorry! I’m not actually prepared to go that far! Just forget this ever happened...!” he shouted as he ran away.

“Ah! I-Itsuka?!”

He heard Tamae’s voice calling out from behind him as he fled.

“Aah, she’s a pretty quirky teacher, huh?” Kotori laughed, sounding relaxed.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” Shido cried, still moving his feet. “How can you just—?”





“Uh...?!”

“...!”

Too focused on his conversation with the earpiece, he slammed into a student walking around the corner and fell over backward.

“Owww!” he said, sitting up. “S-sorry! You okay?”

And then he felt his heart constrict in his chest. “Uh...?!”

Because of course, the student on the floor in front of him was none other than Miss Origami Tobiichi. That wasn’t all. When she had fallen, she landed on her butt, and her legs were splayed out in Shido’s direction.

...She was wearing white ones.

He unconsciously averted his eyes. Origami wasn’t flustered in the slightest.

“I’m fine,” she said, standing up. “What’s wrong?”

She didn’t seem to be asking about the fact that he was running down the hallway. If he had to say, her question was in reference to how he was hanging his head and pressing a finger to his temple.

“Oh, it’s nothing to worry about,” he told her. “It’s just the shock of encountering a situation I was convinced could never actually happen.”

His last stronghold crumbled. Ratatoskr’s simulation abilities were terrifying. Maybe they had actually done a great job with all that stuff in the game.

“Yeah?” she asked and started walking down the hall.

“This is perfect, Shido.” Kotori’s voice echoed in his ear.

“Let’s practice with her, too.”

“H-huh...?!”

“I actually would like data from someone in your age group and not just a teacher. Not quite a Spirit, but she is AST personnel. This could be a great reference. And as far as I can see, she doesn’t seem to be the type to kiss and tell.”

“You... You have to be joking!”

“You want to talk to a Spirit, right?”

“...Ugh.” Shido gasped and bit his lower lip and then took several deep breaths before calling out to Origami. “T-Tobiichi!”

“What?” She turned around as though she had been waiting for this.

He was a little surprised, but he took another deep breath to calm himself. His heart wasn’t pounding as wildly because of his earlier experience with Tamae. Right. As long as he didn’t overdo it, he was fine. As long as he didn’t overdo it.

“That outfit’s cute.”

“My uniform,” she replied flatly.

“...I guess so.”

“Why would you pick her uniform, you antlion?!”

How could the name of an insect make him feel like he was being cursed out? Strange!

He shook his head slightly. *It worked with Tama...!*

“...Want some help?” Reine once again offered him a lifeline, growing impatient.

He still had some reservations about this, but he wasn’t sure he could continue the conversation on his own. He nodded the tiniest bit.

“So, like, Tobiichi,” he recited the words he heard in his ear.

“What?”

“The truth is...I’ve known who you are for a while now.”

“You have.” Her tone was still curt, but incredibly, Origami continued, “I’ve known who you are, too.”

“—!”

He was stunned, but his surprise didn’t leak into his voice. He felt like this whole thing would fall apart like a house of cards if he deviated from the lines Reine was feeding him.

“You have? I’m glad to hear it,” he replied. “I’m really happy we’re in the same class this year. This whole week, I’ve been watching you during class.”

Gah! Even I think that's creepy. I'm not a stalker, Shido thought as he spoke the line.

"You have," she said and looked straight at him. "I've been watching you, too."

"..." He swallowed hard.

The truth was he'd felt awkward, unable to look in her direction in class. To shake off the violent pounding of his heart, he let the words flood into his ear and come out of his mouth.

"Really? Oh, but that's not all. I also hang around after class to sniff your gym clothes and stuff."

"You do."

He was sure she'd reel in disgust at that, but the look on her face didn't change at all. In fact...

"I do that, too."

Do...what?! You mean you sniff your own gym clothes, right?! Please, say you sniff your own! Rivers of sweat poured down Shido's face. And, like, Kotori, Reine! These lines are getting weird!

Given the way Shido's head was spinning, it was impossible for him to speak in his own words now. "Oh yeah? Seems like we're kindred spirits, huh?"

"Kindred," she agreed.

"So then maybe, if you want, would you go out with me? ...Wait! This is too sudden! Pump the brakes!" He looked back and shouted, outraged. He didn't care about the training anymore.

From Origami's perspective, he was a strange man who had voluntarily asked her out and then grandly called his own self out.

"...Aah, I can't believe you'd actually just go and say it," Reine said.

"You *told* me to say it!" Shido shouted resentfully and then gasped and turned back to Origami.

She was there with the same expression on her face, but it looked like her eyes were just the tiniest bit wider.

Although he could have just imagined it.

"Oh! Um, that was... Sorry. Just now—"

"I wouldn't mind."

"...Huh?!" he yelped idiotically. His eyes almost popped out of his head. His mouth dropped open helplessly, all the strength nearly left his limbs—basically, his entire body was slack.

Wait, I don't understand. What did this girl just say?

"Wh-what?" he stammered.

"I said, I wouldn't mind."

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what?"

"I wouldn't mind if we went out."

Sweat exploded out of every pore on his face. He placed a gentle hand on either side of his head and told himself, *Calm down, dude! Just calm down.*

It was unthinkable. If you thought about it normally, this was impossible. After all, how could there be a girl in this world who would say yes to a guy pushing her to go out with him when she could count on one hand the number of times they've spoken?

No, well, maybe it's not that there are none, but I totally never dreamed that I'd get a response like that from Origami.

Wait. Shido's eyebrows shot up. *What if she got the wrong idea?*

"Uh, oh," he started. "You mean 'go out' like go somewhere together, right?"

"...?" She cocked her head slightly to one side. "Was that what you meant?"

"Huh? Oh! No." He shook his head. "Umm, what did you think I meant, Tobiichi?"

"I thought you meant boyfriend-girlfriend."

"...!"

His entire body shook as though lightning had struck him on the top of his head. Somehow, the words *boyfriend-girlfriend* sounded totally immoral coming from Origami's

mouth.

"Was I wrong?"

"N-no...you aren't wrong...but..."

"Okay," she assented, as though nothing had happened.

In the next instant, he was flooded with regret. *Why?! Why did I say "you aren't wrong"?! I mean—! Just now, only now, I could've passed it off as a mistake!!*

Wee-wooooooooooo...

"Ngh?!"

A siren pierced through the silence.

Origami lifted her face slightly.

"I have to go. Bye." And with that, she turned on her heel and ran down the hallway.

"H-hey—"

This time, she didn't stop when Shido called out to her.

"Wh-what am I supposed to do now?"

Before long, he heard a voice through his earpiece. *"Shido, spacequake. We're moving to Fraxinus. Come back."*

"S-so it's a Spirit then?"

"Yes... And its predicted location of appearance is... here."



The time was 5:20 PM.

Avoiding the eyes of the students as they evacuated, Shido, Kotori, and Reine had moved to *Fraxinus*, which hung in the sky above the city. They were now looking at the various bits of information displayed on the large monitor on the bridge.

Having changed into their military uniforms, Kotori and

Reine nodded meaningfully from time to time as they exchanged words, but to be honest, Shido didn't really understand what the numbers shown on-screen meant. About the only thing he got was that the display on the right side was a map of the town with his high school at the center.

"I see, hmm." Sitting in the captain's chair, Kotori slightly smiled as she spoke with the crew, sucking on her Chupa Chups. "Shido."

"What?"

"You'll be getting to work straightaway," she told him. "Get ready."

"..." He froze in place.

He had expected this, though, so he should have been prepared to hear that order. Still, when the time actually came, he doubted he'd be able to hide his nerves.

"Is he being sent into actual battle already, Commander?" Kannazuki asked abruptly, standing next to the captain's chair, eyes on the screen. "His opponent is a Spirit. If he fails, that means death. Has his training been suffi—? *Shoof!*"

Kotori plunged a fist into Kannazuki's gut. "Disagreeing with my judgment? You're awfully full of yourself, hmm, Kannazuki? As punishment, speak like a pig until I say you can stop."

"O-oink," he replied, as though this happened every day.

Shido wiped away the sweat from his face. "Actually, Kotori, I think what Kannazuki said is pretty on the nose."

"Oh my!" Kotori gasped. "You can understand pig, Shido? I guess you really are one."

"D-don't underestimate pigs!" he shouted. "They're surprisingly amazing creatures!"

"I know. They like to be clean, and they're strong. Some say they possess an intelligence greater than dogs. So I call my capable subordinate Kannazuki and the older brother I so cherish *pig* with the utmost respect. You pig."

“...Hngh!” he groaned.

It didn’t sound much like a title of honor coming from her mouth.

Kotori seemed to understand that Kannazuki was not wrong in his doubt nor Shido in his unease. Flicking the lollipop stick upward, she gestured at the screen. “Shido, you’re pretty lucky.”

“Huh?” Following her gaze, he turned his eyes toward the screen.

The incomprehensible numbers still flashed there, but he could see a change on the map to the right. There was a red icon on his school with several little yellow icons displayed around it.

“The red’s the Spirit, yellow are the AST,” she told him.

“...And what’s so lucky?”

“Look at the AST. They haven’t moved, right?”

“Ohhh... Yeah.”

“They’re waiting for the Spirit to go outside.”

“What? Why? They’re not charging in?”

She shrugged dramatically. “Think for a second before you speak. It’s embarrassing. Honestly, a slime mold is more intelligent than you.”

“Wh-what?! Come on!”

“The CR units weren’t made to fight in confined spaces. They might have that Territory, but their mobility drops with all the obstacles and narrow hallways inside a building. Their field of view is obstructed.” Kotori snapped her fingers, and in response, the screen switched to a video feed of the school.

There was a shallow crater in the courtyard. The roads around it and part of the academy had been neatly erased. It was just like what Shido had seen the other day.

“It looks like she slipped into the half-destroyed school after appearing in the yard,” she told him. “We almost never have this kind of luck. Now we can make contact with the Spirit without the AST getting in the way.”

“...Got it.”

Her logic made sense. But something she said nagged at him, and he abruptly narrowed his eyes.

“...If the Spirit had appeared outside as usual, exactly how were you going to have me contact her?”

“Wait until the AST was annihilated or just toss you into the fray,” she replied immediately.

“...” He understood now exactly how fortunate this situation was.

“Mm. So let’s get going then,” she said. “Shido, you still have the earpiece in?”

“Y-yeah.” He touched his right ear. The earpiece he’d been using was indeed still there.

“Excellent. I’ll send you with the camera, too, so if you’re having trouble, tap the earpiece twice as a sign.”

“Mm... Roger. But, like...” He half glared at Kotori and then Reine, who was in her own seat on the lower deck of the bridge.

From what he had learned of their advice during training, they weren’t exactly the most promising people to have on his support team.

“Relax, Shido.” Kotori grinned boldly, perhaps guessing at his general train of thought from the look on his face. “The *Fraxinus* crew is full of solid, capable people.”

“I-it is?” he asked in return, wearing a doubtful expression.

“For example.” She stood up, her coat flapping, and snapped a finger out at a crew member on the lower deck. “The master of romance with *five* marriages under his belt! Bad Marriage Kawagoe!”

“But that means four divorces!”

“Extremely popular with Filipinas working in nightlife! Boss Mikimoto!”

“They’re clearly charmed by his money!”

“Her rivals in love meet misfortune, one after the other! The woman haunting the night, Nailknocker Shiizaki!”

"She's definitely putting curses on them!"

"The man with a hundred wives! Dimension Breaker Nakatsugawa!"

"Are these wives three-dimensional?!"

"A woman who can no longer legally go within five hundred meters of the man she loves because her affection knows no bounds! Restraining Order—I mean, *Deep Love* Minowa!"

"Why are they all like this?!" Shido shrieked.

"...As a crew, they're tried and true," Reine whispered from the deck below.

"S-sure, you say that, but—"

"You're fine," Kotori snapped. "Hurry up and go. Once the Spirit goes outside, the AST will swarm her." She kicked him hard in the butt.

"...Ow! Y-you jerk..."

"There's no need to worry," she assured him. "You'll be fine. If you die, you can just start a new game."

"Cut it out! I'm not a certain plumber, okay?!"

"Mamma mia!" she teased. "A big brother who doesn't believe his little sister will only know misfortune."

"I don't need a little sister who doesn't listen to her big brother telling me that," Shido said with a sigh, but he obediently turned toward the bridge door.

"Good luck." Kotori popped a thumb up at him.

He waved his hand listlessly. "Yeah."

His heart was still pounding, but he couldn't let this chance slip away. He wasn't thinking of anything so grand as to defeat her, make her love him, or save the world.

He just wanted to talk with that girl one more time.

The transfer device, which used a Realizer set into the lower part of *Fraxinus*, could instantly send and recover items as long as there were no line-of-sight obstructions. At

first, it had made him feel a little unpleasant, like motion sickness, but he had more or less gotten used to it now after using it a few times.

In an instant, his field of view switched from *Fraxinus* to the dim rear side of the school, and he shook his head.

"Okay, first inside the school—," he started to say and then stopped...because the wall of the academy before him had been whisked away, allowing him to peek inside.

"Seeing the actual building makes it really set in..."

"Well, *this is perfect. Go in through there.*" He heard Kotori's voice through his earpiece.

"...Roger," he muttered, scratching his cheek as he entered the school building. If he dawdled too long, the Spirit might leave, and the AST might spot him before he found her and take him into custody to "protect" him.

"Now, *let's hurry. I'll guide you. The Spirit is three floors up, fourth classroom ahead of you.*"

"Roger...!" Shido took a deep breath and then raced up the nearby stairs.

In less than a minute, he was standing in front of the classroom Kotori had specified. Given that the door wasn't open, he couldn't see what was going on inside, but his heart pounded when he thought about the fact that a Spirit was in there.

"Wait." He frowned. "This is Year Two, Class Four. It's *my* classroom."

"Oh my! Is it?" Kotori said. "*Perfect. I won't go so far as to say it's an advantageous position, but it's better than some place you don't know at all.*"

He didn't actually know the classroom all that well, given that he'd only recently advanced to his second year of high school. At any rate, he had to make contact before the Spirit played any tricks. He swallowed hard.

"Hey, hello, what're you doing in a place like this?" He repeated what he was going to say first several times in a quiet voice before taking a deep breath and opening the

door.

“—”

The classroom was red in the evening sun.

“Ah,” he gasped, the flimsy words he’d prepared in his mind completely blown away.

A girl with black hair in a bizarre dress was sitting with one knee up on the desk fourth from the front, second row from the window—Shido’s desk. A fantastical radiance shone in her eyes, which were languidly half-open as she stared blankly at the blackboard, upper body illuminated by the evening sun. She was so divine as to instantly rob any viewer of the power of thought.

This near-perfect scene quickly crumbled.

“Hmm?” The girl noticed Shido’s entry and opened her eyes wide.

“...H-hey—” He raised a hand as he tried to calm himself down somehow.

Fyoom!

He thought the girl was casually waving at him when a black beam of light scraped his cheek and flew past him. A second later, the door where his hand was resting and the windows in the hall behind it shattered with a tremendous roar.

“Eep...?!”

It was all so sudden that he froze in place for a moment. When he touched his cheek, his fingers came back wet with blood. But he couldn’t just stand there stunned.

“*Shido!*” Kotori screamed, loud enough to make his ear hurt.

A melancholy look on her face, the girl swung her arm up high. In her palm, a sphere of inky-black light pulsed.

“Hey—”

Before he could even cry out, he was scrambling to hide himself behind the wall.

A moment later, a stream of light burst past where he had just been standing and easily ripped through the

school's exterior wall, exploding outside. This was followed by a series of umbral rays surging past him.

"S-stop! I don't want to fight you!" he called from the now extremely well-ventilated hallway.

Perhaps his words reached her; no more black beams shot past him.

"...I-is it okay if I go inside?" he muttered to himself.

"From what I can tell, she's not preparing to fire on you," Kotori replied. *"If she was going to, it'd be easy for her to send you flying with your makeshift barricade. But it would be bad if you waited too long and her mood soured. Let's go."*

The camera following him must have already gone into the classroom.

Gulping, he stood up in front of the doorless entrance.

The young woman stared at him. She wasn't attacking at least, but she eyed him with suspicion.

"A-anyway, calm d—" Holding up both hands to show that he meant her no harm, he stepped into the classroom.

However.

"Stop." The girl's clear voice rang out, and a beam of light scorched the floor at his feet. He immediately froze in place. She looked him over from head to toe contemptuously. "Who are you?"

"Ohhh, I'm—," Shido started.

Kotori put the brakes on. *"Stop right there."*

On the main bridge of the *Fraxinus*, the monitor showed a close-up shot of a Spirit girl clad in a dress of light. Her face was lovely and her eyes were sharp as she glared to the right of the camera—toward Shido.

A variety of parameters, such as affection, had been placed around her. This display showed her mental state, as analyzed numerically by Reine with a Realizer. *Fraxinus's* AI

turned the conversation into text in real time and displayed it on the lower part of the screen.

At first glance, the screen looked exactly the same as that of the dating sim Shido had used for training.

The handpicked crew turned their faces up toward the extra-large monitor, looking intense and serious. The whole scene was somehow surreal.

Kotori's eyebrow twitched.

"Who are you?"

The instant the Spirit turned to Shido and spoke those words, the screen flickered, and a siren began to wail on the bridge.

"Th-this is—," someone on the crew cried out, bewildered, as a window popped up in the center of the screen.

(1) "I'M SHIDO ITSUKA. I'VE COME TO RESCUE YOU!"

(2) "STOP. I'M JUST PASSING BY. PLEASE DON'T KILL ME."

(3) "YOU SHOULD GIVE YOUR OWN NAME BEFORE ASKING FOR SOMEONE ELSE'S."

"Choices!" Kotori flicked the stick of her lollipop up.

The *Fraxinus* AI worked together with Reine's analysis Realizer to observe the changes in the Spirit's pulse, brain waves, and other parameters, then instantly displayed possible responses. This display only came up at times when the Spirit's mental state was unstable. Meaning that if a person responded correctly, they could curry favor with the Spirit. But if they made a mistake...

Kotori immediately pulled the mic to her mouth and checked Shido as he was about to reply. "Stop right there."

"—?"

She heard him gasp through the speakers. He must have had no idea why she'd instructed him not to speak. They couldn't keep the Spirit waiting forever. Kotori turned to her crew.

“Choose the best option! In under five seconds!”





The subordinates immediately turned to their consoles, and the results were soon displayed on Kotori's personal monitor.

Most of the votes were for...(3).

"Seems like you're all in agreement with me then," she said, and the crew nodded. "The first choice seems like the right approach on first glance, but she thinks we're an enemy. If we say that one now, she'll think it's suspicious. And it's kind of a bit much."

"The second choice is out of the question," Kannazuki said, standing at attention. "Even if he did manage to make it out of there, that would be the end of it."

"True," came Reine's voice from the lower deck of the bridge. "On that point, three makes sense. And if we do it right, we might be able to steer the conversation."

Kotori nodded and brought her mic in close again.

"...H-hey? What's going on...?" Shido stood stock-still in the unpleasant atmosphere, prevented from speaking under the sharp eyes of the girl before him.

"...I'll ask one more time," the young woman snarled, sounding irritated, and narrowed her eyes further. "Who *are* you?"

"*Shido.*" He finally heard Kotori's voice in his ear. "*Can you hear me? Answer exactly as I tell you to.*"

"Y-yeah."

"*You should give your own name before asking for someone else's.*"

"You should give your own name before asking for someone else's." Shido's face drained of color. "Wh-what are you making me say...?!"

But it was already too late. The girl's face twisted up into a scowl, and this time, she brought both hands up to create a ball of light.

"Eep...!" Shido hurriedly launched himself off the floor and ducked to the right.

An instant later, a sphere of black light shot through the place where he had been standing. It tore a massive hole in the floor and continued to rip through the second and first floors.

The shock wave blew him backward, and he tumbled toward the edge of the classroom, desks and chairs flying into the air around him.

"...Hngh..."

"*Huh? Weird,*" Kotori said, as if she found the whole interaction deeply mysterious.

"What do you mean 'weird'?! Are you trying to get me killed?!" he cried as he sat up, holding his head.

"I'll ask you one last time," the girl said from the top of his desk. "If you don't feel like answering, I'll assume you're an enemy."

"I-I'm Shido Itsuka! A student here! I'm not an enemy!"

"..."

He raised both his hands.

"Stay there." The Spirit jumped down, eyeing him suspiciously. "Right now, you're within range of my attack."

"..." He bobbed his head up and down without moving from where he sat to show that he had understood.

"...Hmm?" The girl approached him slowly and then bent at the waist to stare into his face for a while before seemingly recognizing him. "We met once before, haven't we?"

"Oh...! Yeah. Earlier this month. Pretty sure it was on the tenth. In town."

"Ohhh." She clapped her hands together before resuming her previous stance. "I remember. You're the one who was saying that weird stuff."

Seeing that the suspicion had faded the tiniest bit from her eyes, Shido relaxed momentarily.

However.

"Nkeee...?!" he squealed as she grabbed his bangs and yanked his face up.

She tilted her head to one side so that she could peer into his eyes. "You said you didn't want to kill me, right? Hmm. An obvious ploy. Spill it. What are you plotting here? You trying to get me off guard and attack from behind?!"

"...Ngh."

Shido gritted his teeth. Rather than fear the girl, he felt so sad that he could hardly stand it. She couldn't even believe for a second that he hadn't come to kill her. The world around her had taught her not to trust others.

"People!" he shouted, without thinking. "Not all of them...are trying to kill you!"

"..." The Spirit's eyes grew wide, and she let go of his hair. She stared at him for a brief moment before speaking. "They're not?"

"That's right."

"All the people I've met said I had to die," she told him.

"They're...wrong..."

"..." The girl said nothing but reached behind her.

Eyes narrowed, lips pursed—her face said that she still didn't entirely believe what he was saying. "...So tell me. If you're not planning to kill me, what exactly are you here for?"

"Well, I—"

"*Shido.*" Kotori's voice echoed in his ear.

"Another choice, hmm?" Kotori licked her lips and stared at the options displayed in the middle of the screen.

(1) "TO SEE YOU, OF COURSE."

(2) "WHO CARES."

(3) "IT'S JUST A COINCIDENCE. THAT'S ALL."

Her crew's opinions were immediately collected on her monitor.

"Option two? Well, judging from her earlier reaction, that's probably a no-go. Shido, go ahead and tell her the safe choice, that you came to see her," Kotori said into the mic.

Shido opened his mouth as he stood up on-screen. *"I came to see you."*

"...?" The girl looked stunned. *"Me? For what?"*

The moment the question left her lips, a new set of choices popped up on-screen.

(1) "I FIND YOU INTERESTING."

(2) "TO LOVE YOU."

(3) "THERE'S SOMETHING I WANTED TO ASK YOU."

"Hmm, what have we here?" Kotori stroked her chin as the collective response was shown on her monitor. Option two was the popular choice.

"We'd best go straight in on this one, Commander," a crew member said from the lower deck. "We must show her a chivalrous spirit!"

"She's the kind of girl where you have to be up-front!" another chimed in.

Kotori paused thoughtfully and recrossed her legs. "Well, I guess that's fine. And with options one and three, we'll get questions in response again. Shido. Say 'I'm here to love you.'"

Shido shivered.

“Ohhh... Th-that’s, uh...,” Shido stammered, eyes darting around the room.

“What? You can’t tell me? You mean you just showed up here for no reason? Or—”

Her eyes started to glitter dangerously once again.

“I-I’m here,” he interrupted her, waving his hands, “to... love you?”

The girl swept her hand out to the side, and a blade of wind slashed the space above his head, slicing through the classroom wall, which flew off outside. Several of his hairs were trimmed off and danced away in the breeze.

“Wha...?!”

“I’m not in the mood for jokes,” she muttered, looking extremely sullen.

He swallowed hard. The terror he’d felt a moment ago faded, and his heart pounded loud in his ears.

Yeah. That face.

It was that face Shido absolutely hated. A look that despaired of the world, like she didn’t believe for a second that she could be loved.

“I...!” he started, unthinking. “I came here...to talk to you!”

She looked at him as though he were speaking a foreign language. “What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. I wanted to talk to you. About anything. If you don’t like it, you can ignore me. But understand just one thing. I—”

“Shido, calm down,” Kotori instructed in rebuke.

But he didn’t stop. After all, not a single person had ever reached a hand out to this girl. Even though a single word could change everything, there had been no person to deliver this line to her.

Shido had his father, his mother, Kotori. But this young woman had no one. So then he would have to be the one to say it.

“I...I will not reject you.” He enunciated each word slowly

and stamped a foot down.

"..." The girl twisted her expression and looked away from him. After a brief silence, she opened her mouth. "... Shido. It was Shido, right?"

"Uh-huh." He nodded.

"You really won't reject me?"

"I really won't."

"Really, really?"

"Really, really."

"Really, really, really?"

"Really, really, really," Shido replied without a moment's hesitation.

The Spirit scratched her head and made a sniffing sound before turning back to him.

"Hmm." She crossed her arms and wore a slight frown. "You think you can fool me like that? You're a dummy—a real dummy."

"I'm telling you—"

"But, well, you know," she continued, the look on her face complicated. "I don't know what your real motives are, but you *are* the first person to try and actually talk to me. I could use you to get some information about this world."

She stuck her nose in the air.

"H-huh?"

"I'm saying I wouldn't *not* talk to you. Right. To get information. Mm-hmm, that's important. Information's super important."

He felt like her face softened just the tiniest bit.

"Y-yeah?" he replied, baffled, as he scratched at his cheek.

Could he assume he'd succeeded at first contact?

"*Nice work.*" Kotori's voice echoed in his ear. "*Keep going.*"

"Uh, uh-huh..."

The girl began to pace around the classroom. "But just try doing anything weird. I'll rip open a wind hole in your

body.”

“...Okay, roger that.”

Her slow footfalls echoed in the empty classroom.
“Shido.”

“Wh-what?”

“Question. What exactly is this place? I’ve never seen anything like it before.” She patted the desks that were still standing as she walked.

“Huh? ...Ohhh, it’s a school—a classroom. Um, it’s a place where people my age come to study. We sit in these chairs. Like this.”

“What?” The girl’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “All of these are filled with people? Don’t joke around. There’s nearly forty of them.”

“It’s true,” he said, scratching his head.

When the Spirit had appeared, the city had given the order to evacuate. About the only people she’d ever seen were likely the AST, which wasn’t very many.

“So you—” He was about to call her by name and then cut himself off.

“Hmm?” The girl frowned and put her hand to her chin as though in thought. “Oh, you need a name if you’re talking to someone, huh?” She nodded and stepped over the desk in front of her. “Shido. What do you want to call me?”

“Huh?” he asked in return, not understanding what she was trying to say.

The girl crossed her arms.

“Give me a name,” she told him imperiously.

That’s too much, too soon! he screamed in his heart.

“M-me?!” he cried out loud.

“Yes. I’ve got no plans to converse with anyone else. So it’s fine.”

“Whoa! We got another bombshell here.” Kotori scratched her head in her captain’s chair.

“...Mm, what to do...?” Reine groaned from the lower deck.

Although the siren was wailing on the bridge, no choices appeared on the screen. There were simply too many permutations for the AI to choose a name randomly.

“Keep calm, Shido. Don’t go panicking and giving her a weird name,” Kotori said and stood up to call out to her crew. “People! Send your name proposals to my terminal right now!”

She dropped her gaze to her display. Names were already coming in from several crew members. “Let’s see. Kawagoe!” she barked. “Misako’s your ex-wife’s name, isn’t it?!”

“I-I’m sorry, I couldn’t think of anything.” A man’s apologetic voice came from the lower part of the command room.

“Honestly... What else...? Ku-ra-ra-be-ru? Mikimoto, how do you pronounce this string of letters?”

“Clarabell, ma’am!”

“Horrid name. You are prohibited from ever having children.” She thrust a finger out at the man who’d spoken.

“Apologies! My oldest child is already in elementary school!”

“Your oldest?”

“Yes, ma’am! I have three children!”

“And what are their names?” Kotori asked suspiciously.

“Oldest to youngest: Beau-apple, Fullmonty, and Seraphim!”

“Change their names within the week and move to a new school district,” she commanded.

“Are they that bad?!”

“Think for a sec about how it would feel to be a kid with a weird name, you goby fish!”

“It’s all right!” he replied. “Lately, everyone has a weird

name!"

Thunk! Thunk! A muffled sound echoed through the bridge, probably Shido tapping on his earpiece.

When Kotori looked up, the girl on-screen still had her arms crossed, drumming a finger on an elbow like she was getting tired of waiting. Kotori looked back down at her display. All the options listed there were terrible. She heaved a heavy sigh and shook her head in exasperation. Her subordinates had absolutely no taste at all.

She looked at the girl, how beautiful she was. Something traditional, something elegant would suit her well. For instance...

"Tome."

"Tome! Your name is Tome!"

Eeenh! Eeeenh! A shrill alarm pierced the air, and a red lamp flashed in the command room.

"Code Blue! She's unhappy!" a member of the crew called in a panic.

The affection meter displayed on the main screen plummeted, and tiny spheres of light rained down at Shido's feet on-screen with a machine-gun patter.

"Ngaaaaaaah?!"

"...Kotori?" Reine asked dubiously.

"Huh? Weird." Kotori shook her head. "I thought it was a nice traditional name."

"...I don't know why, but I get the feeling you're making fun of me," the girl said, a vein throbbing in anger on her forehead.

"...S-sorry! ...Hang on a sec!"

When he thought about it, she definitely wasn't a Tome. He cursed his own foolishness as he shrank in fear in front of the smoking floor before him. Apologies to all the older ladies of the land, but Tome wasn't the sort of name you

gave a girl nowadays.

The idea that the Spirit would ask him to name her hadn't ever crossed his mind. He managed to somehow get his heartbeat back under control as he let his eyes and his thoughts wander. But it wasn't like a girl's name was going to pop up in the back of his mind suddenly.

Hmm... A good name... The names of girls he knew flashed through his head, but he didn't have enough time to really consider them all. The Spirit's face was growing increasingly sour.

"...T-Tohka." Shido uttered a name, at his wit's end.

"Hmm?" She frowned.

"H-how...about it?"

"..." The girl was silent for a while before finally saying, "Hmm, okay. Better than Tome."

He smiled in relief as he scratched the back of his head. But then a regret greater than his alleviation came down to crush him. After all, he had given the young woman this stupidly easy name because he'd first met her on April tenth—*tohka*, the tenth day.

"...What am I even doing...?"

"You say something?" the Spirit asked.

"Oh! No, nothing..." He hurriedly waved his hand.

She looked at him curiously for a second but didn't pursue it further. Instead, she came over to stand next to him. "So, Tohka. How do you spell it?"

"Oh, it's..." Shido walked toward the blackboard, picked up some chalk, and wrote the characters on the board.

"Hmm." The Spirit hummed thoughtfully and traced the blackboard with a fingertip, imitating him.

"Oh. Uh, you have to use chalk or it won't—," he started to say and then stopped. Her finger had etched the two characters clumsily into the chalkboard itself.

"What?"

"...Oh, nothing."

"Yeah?" she said and stared at the characters of her own

name for a while before nodding slightly. "Shido."

"Wh-what?"

"Tohka."

"Huh?"

"Tohka. That's my name. Pretty, huh?"

"Y-yeah." Shido felt kind of...awkward. In all sorts of ways. He picked at his cheek and averted his eyes.

But the girl—Tohka spoke once more in the same way. "Shido."

Even he understood what she was getting at. "T-Tohka..."

The corners of her mouth jerked up with satisfaction at the sound of her name coming from his mouth.

"...Ngh." His heart skipped a beat. Now that he was thinking about it, this was the first time he'd seen her smile.

"...Huh...?"

He heard an explosive roar, and then the school itself was rocked back and forth. He immediately put a hand on the blackboard to brace himself. "Wh-what the...?!"

"Shido, get down." Kotori's voice echoed in his ear.

"Huh...?"

"Just do it."

Not knowing which way was up, he did as he was told and threw himself down on the floor.

In the next instant, an earsplitting drilling filled the air, and the windows of the classroom shattered all at once. Bullets gouged holes in the wall on the other side of the room, like something straight out of a mafia war.

"Wh-what's going on...?!" he shouted.

"Looks like they're attacking from outside. Maybe to draw the Spirit out," Kotori told him. *"Ohhh, or maybe they're going to take the whole school down and get rid of any hiding places."*

"Wh—? They can't just—!"

"We have the disaster relief corps of wizards now, after all. They can get everything back to normal in no time flat, so it's fine if the AST destroy the school. Still, this is

unprecedented. Never thought they'd take such a drastic measure."

Shido lifted his head. The look on Tohka's face now as she gazed out through the shattered windows was totally different from her expression a moment ago. Naturally, she hadn't been touched by so much as a shard of glass, much less a bullet, but her face was twisted up in pain.

"Tohka!" he unconsciously called out to her.

"..." With a gasp, she turned to look at him.

The terrible roar of gunfire came again, but the assault on the classroom had stopped for the moment.

He pulled himself up, wary of what was going on outside.

"Get out of here, Shido." Tohka lowered her eyes sadly. "If you're with me, you'll get shot by your compatriots."

"..." He swallowed hard, unable to speak. He really did need to get out of there. But...

"You have two options," Kotori told him. "Run or stay."

He hesitated briefly before saying in a strained voice, "... How can I run away, in this situation...?"

"Idiot."

"...Fine, I'm an idiot."

"That was a compliment. Let me give you a bit of advice. If you don't want to die, stay as close as you can to the Spirit."

"...Okay." He pressed his lips together tightly and sat down at Tohka's feet.

"Huh?" Her eyes flew open. "What are you doing? Hurry up and—"

"As if I could leave...!" he interrupted. "Right now is our time to chat. They're nothing. They don't bother me. You want information about this world, right? I'll tell you everything I know."

"...!"

For a moment, Tohka stared down in surprise and then she took a seat on the floor across from him.



“—”

Wearing her wiring suit, Origami clutched a massive Gatling gun in both hands. She checked the sight, pulled the trigger, and sprayed the school with bullets. The weapon was large, the type normally equipped on warships, but because her Territory was deployed, she felt almost no weight or recoil. She watched coolly as the hail of bullets whipped through the school, reducing it to a myriad of holes.

Still, her Realizer was not anti-Spirit. It was simply to destroy the building and flush the Spirit out.

“So? Is it coming out?” Ryouko’s voice came to her through the comm in Origami’s headset. The older girl was standing right next to Origami, but her actual voice couldn’t reach her over the gunfire.

“No confirmation yet,” Origami replied without stopping her attack. She opened her eyes wide and stared hard at the crumbling structure.

She was far enough away that she normally wouldn’t notice the pages posted on the bulletin board off to one side of the school, but with her Territory deployed, she could read each word on every post. She narrowed her eyes slightly.

Year 2, Class 4. Her own classroom. The exterior wall had wholly fallen away thanks to their attack, and she could see the target Spirit inside. But...

“Hmm? Is that...?” Ryouko said uncertainly.

Her apprehension was not unfounded. There was someone else in the classroom with the Spirit—a boy, from the look of it. Maybe a student who didn’t evacuate in time.

“Wh-what’s that? Is he being attacked by the Spirit?” Ryouko asked.

Origami ignored Ryouko and stared into the classroom.

She felt like she'd seen that young man before.

"—!"

And then her eyes widened. It was her classmate—Shido Itsuka.

"*Origami?*" Ryouko asked from the side.

Instead of answering her captain, Origami started giving silent orders—orders to the Realizer surrounding her to produce the fastest mobility possible.

"*Hey, Origami?!*" Ryouko cried.

"*It's too dangerous. Please avoid acting on your own,*" came a transmission from headquarters.

However, she didn't stop. She threw down the Gatling gun, drew the close-combat anti-Spirit laser blade—called No Pain—on her hip, and headed for the school.



As bullets whizzed past them, Shido sat facing a girl in his classroom and talked to her. This was obviously the first time he'd ever done this in his life.

The projectiles seemed to avoid them as they ripped through the school, likely thanks to Tohka's power. That said, having a bullet pass before your eyes was not something you got to experience in everyday life. He felt like if he flinched even the tiniest bit, one of them would hit him, so he tried to lock his body in place as they spoke.

The details of the conversation itself were nothing special.

Tohka asked the questions she hadn't been able to ask anyone else, and Shido answered them. Her smile betrayed her satisfaction with the exchange.

He didn't know how long they'd been talking when he heard Kotori's voice in his ear.

"*The numbers are stable. Try asking her a question yourself. We want information on the Spirits.*"

His head churned for a moment before he said, "Hey, Tohka?"

"What?"

"So, like...what exactly are you?"

"Hmm?" She furrowed her brow at his question. "Dunno."

"'Dunno'...?" he parroted.

"That's the truth. Just how it is. I don't know how long ago it was, but suddenly I sprouted *there*. That's all. My memory's fuzzy, distorted. I have no idea what I am."

"Y-you don't...?" he asked, scratching his cheek.

"I don't." She sighed as she crossed her arms. "I was suddenly born into this world one day, and before I could even gather my thoughts, the mech-heads were already dancing around me in the sky."

"M-mech-heads...?"

"Those people making all the noise—*pew, pew, pew*."

The AST. Shido grinned.

Then he heard a bright buzzer over his earpiece, the kind that sounded when you got the right answer on a quiz show.

"...! *This is your chance, Shido*," Kotori said.

"Huh...? For what?"

"*The Spirit's mood meter is over seventy. If you're going to make a move, it's gotta be now.*"

"Make a move? ...What should I do?"

"*Hmm, right... How about you ask her out on a date?*"

"What...?!" he yelped loudly.

"Hmm? What's wrong, Shido?" Tohka frowned as she looked at him.

"Oh, it's nothing. Forget it."

He tried to smooth it over, but she continued to stare at him with suspicious eyes.

"..."

"*Just ask her*," Kotori insisted. "*You gotta just go there to boost your intimacy level.*"

"Okay, but, like, the second she shows up, the AST will..."

"All the more reason. Ask her to run into a large building the next time she appears. Aquarium, movie theater, department store, anything. Even better if there's underground facilities. That way, the AST won't be able to enter directly."

"...M-mph," he groaned.

"Why do you keep muttering to yourself? ...You *are* conspiring to kill me, aren't you?!"

"N-no! No! That's not it!" He hurried to protest the accusation.

Tohka's gaze grew sharper, and a light sphere materialized on one of her fingertips.

"Then spill it," she demanded. "What were you saying?"

"Hngh..." Sweat beaded on his forehead.

"*See?*" a jeering voice echoed in his ear. "*Give up. Date! Date!*"

She had clearly gotten the whole crew to join her in this chant. He heard the call to date on the other side of the earpiece like distant thunder.

"Date!"

"Date!"

"Date!"

"Ugh! Fine! I get it!" Shido cried, giving up.

What Kotori was saying *did* make a kind of sense to him, and he knew it was important to lay the groundwork for the next steps. Still, it was a little awkward.

"So, um, Tohka?"

"Hmm? What?"

"Uh, um," he stammered. "Would you, uh."

"Mm."

"L-like to go...on a date with me sometime?"

Tohka looked stunned. "What's a *date*?"

"S-so it's like..." He grew increasingly embarrassed and averted his eyes as he rubbed his cheeks.

"Shido!" Kotori's voice came in a little on the loud side.

"The AST are moving!"

"Huh...?!" he cried, even though Tohka would hear him and wonder.

In the blink of an eye, Origami popped up from outside the now-airy classroom.

Tohka's face instantly grew stern, and she opened her palm in the direction of the intruder.

A heartbeat later, Origami charged Tohka, having materialized a blade of light from a rough device in her hand.

Everything was filled with sparking fireworks like a welding workshop.

"Hngh...!" Origami groaned.

"Boor!" Tohka barked as she caught the blade of light in her hand and knocked it and Origami aside.

"...Ngh!" Origami was sent flying backward, and she gritted her teeth slightly. However, she immediately straightened up and landed neatly on the bullet-hole-ridden floor.

"Tch! You again?" Tohka said disdainfully, as she lightly waved the hand that had stopped the blade of light.

Origami glanced at Shido and then let out a sigh, as though relieved. She quickly readied the strange weapon once more and turned cold eyes on Tohka.

Seeing this, Tohka also glanced at Shido before thrusting her heels into the floor below her feet. "Sandalphon—Massacre Ruler!"

A bulge pushed up from the floor of the classroom, and a throne appeared.

"Wh...?" He gasped.

"Shido, withdraw!" Kotori shouted. *"We'll pick you up with Fraxinus. Get as far away from them as you can!"*

"Easy for you to say, but how...?!" he shouted.

Tohka drew a sword from the back of the throne and swung it at Origami. The ensuing shock wave easily knocked Shido out of the school.

“Whaaaaaa—?!”

“*Nice!*”

His body became strangely buoyant, enveloped in zero gravity as he was collected by *Fraxinus*.

Chapter 4

Surprise Date

“...Well, I guess...it makes sense that school would be canceled.”

Shido went down the hill that stretched out in front of the academy, twiddling with his hair sheepishly.

The day after he'd named the Spirit Tohka, he went to school like always, only to find the gates firmly closed and the building transformed into rubble. He had actually been on the scene when the structure was destroyed, and if he'd thought about it for two seconds, he would have pieced together that school would be canceled.

Maybe he cut the entire scene from his memory, given how unrealistic and far from the normality of his everyday life it was. Plus, his thought-processing power might have been down due to a lack of sleep, because he'd been forced to take part in a review meeting and had spent the night watching the video of his conversation with Tohka.

“Aah... Maybe I'll go shopping or something.”

He started moving in a different direction from home. He was pretty sure they were out of eggs and milk anyway, and it felt weird somehow to go back the way he'd just come.

A minute later, he stopped once more. A sign in the road told him that entry was prohibited.

“Oh. I guess this road's closed...?” he muttered to

himself.

Even without the sign, however, he could easily tell that it wasn't serviceable. The asphalt surface had been dug up, the brick walls had crumbled, and even the mixed-use buildings had collapsed. It looked like there'd been a war.

"Aah, this was..."

He remembered this place. It was the location of the spacequake where he'd first met Tohka. The relief corps hadn't dealt with it yet, so the carnage of ten days earlier remained as it had been.

"..."

An image of the girl popped up in his mind. Tohka. The Spirit who hadn't had a name until the previous day—the girl called catastrophe.

Yesterday, he had spoken with her for far longer than the last time, and his hunch had turned to certainty. She did indeed have powers that would normally be unthinkable, so much so that he had to agree with the government institutions that considered her a threat. The terrible sight before him was proof of that. They definitely couldn't just leave this phenomenon to run wild.

"...do."

But at the same time, he couldn't believe she was a monster without thought or mercy, someone who was wielding their great power maliciously.

"...y...do."

He hated the melancholy expression she wore. He couldn't allow it to persist.

"Hey, Shido."

With all these thoughts in his brain, he wasn't really focusing on the world around him. He ended up walking back to the school gates.

"...Don't just ignore me!"

"Huh?"

He scratched his head in confusion. He was sure he heard someone from the other side of the no-entry area

where the road was closed.

It was a beautiful voice, crisply cutting through the wind. A voice he had heard somewhere—specifically at school the day before. A voice he shouldn't have been able to hear now and in this place.

"Uh, um." As he compared the tone in his memory with the one he heard now, he turned his gaze in the direction it came from.

He froze in place.

Up ahead, a girl was crouched down on top of a mountain of rubble, clad in a dress that was clearly not the sort of thing anyone wore to hang out in town.

"...T-Tohka?!"

Unless something had gone terribly wrong with his eyes or brain, the young woman before him was the Spirit he had seen at school the day before.

"Finally noticed me? Dummy dum-dum."

Her face was so beautiful that it made him straighten up. It was colored with dissatisfaction as the girl kicked at the rubble, jumped down to a patch of asphalt that just barely retained its original shape, and started moving in his direction.

"Hup!"

Tohka kicked down the no-entry sign to come stand in front of Shido. It must have impeded her passage.

"Wh-what are you doing, Tohka...?" Shido asked finally.

"...Hmm? What do you mean, 'what'?"

"I mean, what are you doing here...?!" he shouted as he looked around.

He could see some housewives standing and chatting, a neighborhood resident walking a dog. No one was evacuating to the shelters, which meant that the spacequake alarm hadn't gone off. That meant neither Ratatoskr nor the AST had detected the foreshocks that heralded a Spirit's appearance.

"Why are you asking me?" The girl herself seemed

completely unconcerned with this abnormal situation. She crossed her arms, looking very much like she did not understand why he'd raised his voice. "You invited me, Shido. To a date or whatever."

"Wha—?!" He gasped, shoulders jolting. "Y-you remembered...?"

"Hmm? What? Are you calling me stupid?"

"No, that's not what I meant..."

"Hmph, well, whatever. Anyway, Shido, hurry with the date. Date-date-date-date."

Her tone as she chanted the word *date* was somehow odd.

"O-okay!" he cried. "I get it, so please stop saying the word!"

"Hmm? Why? Oh! You didn't actually teach me some filthy obscenity because you knew I wouldn't know any better, did you?"

Her cheeks reddened suddenly.

"I—I didn't! No! The word is the height of wholesomeness!" He insisted and then scratched his cheek. That was a bit of a lie.

A date might lead to a situation that was at the pinnacle of lewdness—depending on the person. He squirmed under her dubious gaze.

The neighborhood housewives grinned at them, as if the whole scene was adorable. He felt like at least a couple of their gazes were more curious about Tohka's strange appearance.

"...Mm?" Tohka had apparently noticed the onlookers. Her gaze sharpened as she hid behind Shido. "...Hey, what's with them? Enemies? Should I kill them?"

"H-huh...?!" He shuddered. "No, no, no! Why's that the first thing you suggest? They're just a bunch of ladies."

"What are *you* talking about, Shido?" she demanded. "Those fiery eyes! They're the same as you'd find on birds of prey. I can only assume they're gunning for me. If I just

leave them be, they're bound to turn into a hassle later. I think it'd be better to take them out fast."

Well, their eyes *were* shining, but...that was only because they'd found a new subject to gossip about.

"Relax," he reassured her. "I told you, there aren't *that* many people who want to attack you."

"...Mph." She still seemed alarmed, but at least she didn't look like she was going to go flying at them that very second. "Well, fine. So then this date thing—"

"H-hey, how about we go somewhere else? Okay?" he proposed and started walking briskly.

"Mm. Hey, Shido! Where are you going?!" she called unhappily and quickly trotted after him.

He only let his breath out when they stepped into a deserted alleyway.

"So you finally calmed down? You're a total weirdo," Tohka remarked, with an air of exasperation. "What exactly was wrong with that place?"

"Tohka... What happened to you after everything that went down yesterday?"

He had all kinds of questions for her, but this was the first one that made it out of his mouth.

"Nothing much. Just the usual," Tohka said, looking a little dejected. "They swung swords that can't pass through me, fired bullets that can't hit me. In the end, I disappeared naturally."

"...Disappeared?"

Now that she mentioned it, he felt like Kotori and her gang had used an expression like that, but to be honest, he didn't really understand what it meant.

"I just shift to a different space than this world."

"I-is that even a thing...? What kind of place is it?"

"I don't really know."

"...Huh?"

"The instant I shift over there, I enter a dormant state. The only thing I can just barely remember is this feeling like

I'm drifting along in a dark space. For me, it's like falling asleep."

"So then you come to this world when you wake up?"

"Not quite." Tohka shook her head and continued. "Usually, I don't have any control over any of it. Every so often, a presence pulls me to this world and keeps me here. It feels like being forcefully yanked awake."

"..." Shido gasped.

He knew that when a Spirit appeared, a spacequake occurred. However, if what she was saying were true, her arrivals here had nothing to do with her wishes. Did that make the spacequakes accidents? It was absurd to pin the blame for this on Tohka—on the Spirits.

Then another question materialized in his mind. "... 'Usually'? Is today different?"

"...Hmph." Her face stiffened, her mouth turned down at the corners, and she looked away from him. "H-how would I know?"

He kept prodding, however. "C'mon, answer me. This might be really important."

That was true. If she'd come to this world today of her own will, then maybe that meant her appearance itself wasn't the cause of the spacequakes.

For some reason, her eyes hardened as her cheeks were dyed the faintest cherry pink. "You don't give up. We're done talking about that."

"No, but—," Shido started to say, and Tohka stomped on the ground. The asphalt where her foot landed flashed, and beams of light radiated out from the source.

"Whoa...?!"

Sparks shot into the air when the light touched his shoes.

"Forget it. Hurry up and tell me what this date thing is."

"...Hmph."

She clearly wasn't going to take no for an answer, so he had no choice but to shut up. If he pushed her any further, she might let loose with the beams of light like she had

yesterday.

“...A boy and a girl go out together and do stuff,” he said, after hemming and hawing briefly. “I think.”

“That’s it?” She looked a little deflated.

“Y-yeah...” He was kind of out of his depth here. After all, he’d never been on a date himself. He knew the concept of dating from manga and TV, but that was the extent of his knowledge.

Tohka pouted and crossed her arms. “...So then yesterday, you were saying you wanted to hang out with me, Shido?”

“W-well...I guess...that’s what it...means?” He grew 20 percent more embarrassed at having his own words explained to him like this.

“Oh yeah?” Her face grew a little brighter, and she strode energetically toward the entrance to the alley.

“T-Tohka!”

“What, Shido? We’re gonna go hang out, right?”

“...! A-are you sure...?” he asked, surprised.

“You’re the one who said you wanted to.”

“Oh... Well, that’s true, but—”

“So then hurry up,” she said and started advancing once more. “Before I change my mind.”

“T-Tohka!” he cried out to stop her, realizing that this plan had one fatal flaw. “You can’t wear that!”

“What?” She opened her eyes wide, as though this were entirely unexpected. “What’s wrong with my Astral Dress? It’s my armor and domain. I won’t allow you to insult it.”

“You stand out too much in that outfit...!” he cried. “I mean, the AST’ll sniff you out!”

“Mm.” She grimaced, perhaps realizing that would indeed be annoying. “So then what am I supposed to do?”

“Well, you’ll have to change into something else, but...”

A trail of sweat ran down his cheek. It wasn’t like he had a girl’s change of clothes on him, and it would turn into a whole thing if he took her to a shop. Plus, his wallet was

woefully thin.

"What kind of clothes would be good?" she asked impatiently. "Just tell me."

"Huh? Uh..." He wasn't sure how to answer her at first, but then a figure in a familiar uniform cut across the edge of his field of vision. "Oh..."

A sleepy-looking student he didn't know was walking down the road. She had probably also missed the news that the school was closed.

"Tohka, there." He pointed at the high school girl. "You'll be fine if you're wearing something like that."

"Mm?" She looked in the direction he indicated and put a hand to her chin. "Hmm, I see. So that would be okay." She flipped her index and middle fingers up to generate a black ball of light on her fingertips and turned toward the girl.

"Um, what are you going to do?!" Shido knocked her hand down, almost foaming at the mouth.

The ball of light was launched from her fingers, grazed the girl's hair, and hit the bricks behind her with a dull thud. Tiny fragments broke off the wall and scattered on the ground.

"Eeep...?!" The girl jumped into the air and whirled her head around. After a second, she tilted her head to one side curiously and started walking again, perhaps determining she was actually just half-asleep.

"What're you doing?" Tohka demanded. "I missed."

"What am *I* doing?! I should be asking *you* that!"

"I was just going to knock her unconscious and take her clothes." She then gave him a blank look as if to say, "So?"

"Listen, Tohka." Shido let out a sigh from the depths of his soul and put a hand to his forehead. "You can't attack people. It's not allowed."

"Why not?"

"...Well, you feel bad when the AST attacks you, right?" asked Shido. "Listen. It's not okay to do things to other people that you don't like people doing to you."

“...Hmm.” She pursed her lips in dissatisfaction. It wasn’t that she didn’t understand what he was saying but more that she was unhappy with the way he spoke to her as if she were a child. “...Fine. I’ll keep that in mind.”

She lifted her face as though an idea had just occurred to her. “No choice then. I guess I’ll do something about my outfit first,” she said and snapped her fingers.

Instantly, the dress she was wearing melted into the air. As if to replace the strange outfit, particles of light clustered around her body to form a different silhouette.

A few seconds later, Tohka was standing in front of him wearing the same Raizen High uniform as the girl who had been walking down the street earlier.

“Huh? Wh-what the—?”

“I released the Astral Dress and made new clothes,” she stated, crossing her arms. “I only had the visual information, so the details might be different, but well, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Okay, but if you can do this, then why not do it right from the start?!”

Tohka flapped a hand at him, like she didn’t need his nagging. “Anyway, where are we going?”

“Th-that’s...” He put a hand to his right ear, as if seeking advice.

Then, a moment too late, he realized he wasn’t wearing the earpiece.

Naturally, there was also no camera buzzing around them...because Kotori and the rest of the crew on *Fraxinus* didn’t know Tohka was here.

In other words, they were completely alone.

He felt slightly dizzy, and his stomach started to churn from the pressure. Even if they only gave awful advice, it still felt very different when he had them behind him and when he didn’t.

“What’s wrong, Shido?” Tohka asked.

“...It’s nothing.” He took several deep breaths and began

to walk awkwardly.

After a second or two, Tohka called to him, "Shido, you're walking too fast! Ease up a little."

"O-oh, sorry..." He slowed down a bit. They had different stride lengths, so it was only natural that he would end up pulling ahead, but it was a strange feeling somehow.

He was walking alongside a girl.

For Shido, who had basically never gone anywhere with a girl before, it was a new sensation. (Kotori bounced along and went ahead of him, so she was not much of a reference point.)

He glanced at Tohka beside him. She looked like a totally normal girl, far from some kind of monster who could destroy heaven and earth with the swing of a sword.

When the pair left the alley and went onto the main road, lined with shops, Tohka frowned and whirled her head around, taking it all in.

"...Wh-what's with all the people? Is this war?!" she asked, suddenly alert to everything in all directions.

She was apparently surprised by the number of cars and people, an order of magnitude greater than anything she'd likely seen before. Small balls of light materialized on every finger of both hands.

"No, I told you, it's not like that!" Shido hurried to put the brakes on. "No one here is after your life!"





“...Really?”

“Really,” he assured, and she extinguished the luminous spheres, although her guard remained up.

“...Hmm?” Abruptly, her face relaxed. “Hey, Shido. What’s that smell?”

“...Smell?” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Just as she said, there was something fragrant wafting through the air. “Oh, it’s probably from there.” He pointed to a bakery to the right.

“Oh-ho,” she said and stared hard at the establishment.

“...Tohka?”

“Mm? What?”

“You want to go inside?”

“...”

The corners of her mouth turned down, and her fingers twitched. With impeccable timing, her stomach rumbled loudly. Apparently, Spirits got hungry, too.

“If you want to go in, Shido,” she said, finally, “I wouldn’t *not* go in with you.”

“...I want to go in. I reeeeeeally want to go inside.”

“Yeah? I guess that settles it!” she declared, swinging her arms and seeming very happy, and then she opened the bakery door.

“...”

Hiding behind the wall, Origami let out a tiny sigh as she stared at the boy and girl chatting in front of the bakery, the expression on her face not changing in the slightest.

When she arrived at school, it was closed, so she was about to head back home when she spotted Itsuka walking with this young woman. This was alarming enough in and of itself. In true *girlfriend* fashion, she calmly began tailing them.

Soon, she realized she had an even bigger problem.

Origami had seen this girl's face before.

"Spirit," she muttered.

That was right. Monster. Anomaly. World-killing catastrophe. This extraordinary person who Origami and her team were supposed to eradicate was wearing a high school uniform and walking casually next to Shido.

However, when she thought about it, this was impossible. There was a powerful and unmistakable foreshock when a Spirit appeared. There was no way the AST measurement team would have missed it. The spacequake alarm should have gone off like it had yesterday, and a messenger should have come running for Origami.

She took her cell phone out of her bag and opened it. There were no new messages.

Was the girl not actually a Spirit, just someone who was the spitting image of her?

"...There's no way," she said quietly. She wouldn't have forgotten the Spirit's face. She pushed a button on her phone, selected a number from her address book, and pressed the CALL button.

"AST, Master Sergeant Origami Tobiichi. A-0613." She gave her affiliation and identification code before getting into the main topic. "Do a measurement."



"Oh, Reine. Give it to me if you don't want it."

"...Mm. Sure. You can have it."

Kotori reached out with her fork and stabbed into a raspberry on the plate in front of Reine. She brought it to her mouth and enjoyed its tart sweetness. "Mmm, yum. Why don't you like them?"

"...Because they're so sour," Reine said and took a sip of apple tea with a heap of sugar in it.

They were at a café on the main street of Tengu. Kotori

was in her white ribbons and junior high uniform, while Reine wore a faded knit shirt and jeans.

Kotori had gone to classes as she always did, but it seemed that her school had also taken damage in the aftershocks of the previous day's spacequake, so lessons had been canceled. The idea of simply going straight back home peeved her, though, so she called Reine, and now they were feasting on desserts together.

"...Oh right," Reine said, as though she'd just remembered something. "This is the perfect chance for me to ask you."

"Whaaat?"

"...I know this is pretty basic—sorry—but why was *he* picked to negotiate with the Spirits?"

"Hmm... Promise you won't tell anyone?"

"...I promise," Reine agreed in a hushed voice.

Kotori nodded. Reine Murasame was a woman who kept her word. "The truth is, I'm not related to my big brother. It's the most clichéd dating-sim trope there is."

"...Oh?" Reine's expression was neutral, neither interested nor surprised. She simply digested Kotori's words and looked about to ask how these two things were related.

"That's why I like you, Reine."

"...?" The older woman looked at her curiously.

"Forget it," Kotori told her. "So anyway. I don't really remember how old he was when this happened, but Shido was abandoned by his real mom, and my family took him in. This was when I was really little, so I don't remember much. But I guess it was pretty rough going when he first moved in. Like, he was on the verge of killing himself or something."

"..." For some reason, Reine raised an eyebrow.

"What's wrong?" Kotori asked.

"...Nothing. Go on."

"Hmm. Well, I guess that was inevitable, y'know? For a

kid who's still in the single digits age-wise, your mother is like a god, and I think Shido felt like his own existence had been rejected when she abandoned him. Everything settled down after a year or so, though." She sighed and then continued. "Maybe that's why he's weirdly sensitive when other people are in despair."

"...Despair?"

"Mmm." Kotori nodded. "Like when everyone completely rejects you. You start to think no one loves you—which was basically what he was like back then. If he sees anyone with a gloomy face, he'll inject himself into their situation without a moment's hesitation, even if it's a total stranger. So I thought just maybe." She paused. "He was about the only person I could think of who would happily face the Spirit."

"...I see." Reine lowered her eyes. "...But I wasn't asking about that kind of emotional reason."

"..." Kotori studied her for a moment. "Meaning?"

"...I wish you wouldn't feign innocence here. I know you know. *What* exactly is he?"

Reine was Ratatoskr's top analyst. Using a custom Realizer, she measured the composition of objects, temperature distributions, and brain waves—generally capturing even the subtleties of a person's emotions, abilities, and special traits.

Kotori sighed. "Well, I figured it would come to this when I gave him to you."

"...Yeah, sorry, but I did a little analysis... I thought it was weird you'd involve a civilian in this mission without a clear reason."

"Mm, I don't mind. Everyone'll find out at some point anyway."

Klak! The door opened, and the waitress called out a greeting. "Welcome!"

Kotori took the straw in the cup in front of her and put it in her mouth to suck up the last of her blueberry juice.

“Pwaaaaaaaah?!”

She spurted out all the liquid in her mouth when she saw a couple come in and sit down at the table behind Reine.

“...”

The boy and girl didn’t notice, but Reine took serious damage—in other words, she was soaked.

“Sorry, Reine,” Kotori apologized in a hushed voice.

“...Mm.” Reine took a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped her face like nothing had happened. “...What was that about, Kotori?”

“...I thought I saw something irrational and unrealistic.”

“...And what was that?”

Kotori pointed wordlessly.

“...?” Reine turned her head and instantly froze in place.

A few seconds later, she slowly turned back around and brought her apple tea to her lips...and then *pffft!* She spurted tea at Kotori.

“...Well, I’ll be.” For some reason, she spoke with a completely different accent, perhaps shocked in her own way.

And why wouldn’t she be?

After all, Kotori’s older brother, Shido Itsuka, was sitting behind her with a girl.

On top of that, the young woman in question was the very same one Kotori and her crew called a catastrophe, a Spirit.

“Uhhhh... What is *that*?” Kotori quietly asked as she wiped her face with the handkerchief Reine had given her, which had an image of a bear in the center. Now stained with blueberry juice and apple tea, it looked like the TV superhero Kikaida—half-red, half-blue.

Kotori fished her cell phone out of her pocket and looked at it. There were no new messages from Ratatoskr, which meant no one had detected the shaking of space that accompanied the materialization of a Spirit.

The problem was, the Spirit Tohka was definitely sitting at that café table. There was no way there was another girl

that beautiful in this world.

“Does this mean there’s a way for the Spirits to appear here without being detected by us?” Kotori mused.

“...Is there a chance she’s a doppelgänger?” Reine suggested.

Kotori thought a moment but then quickly shook her head. “If that were the case, that would mean my big brother is on a date with a regular girl. And if I had to say which was more unrealistic, that or the silent appearance of a Spirit...it’s the former by a narrow margin.”

“...I see.” This was fairly damning, but Reine assented to it readily. “...But this is serious then. Can Shin handle a Spirit all by himself?”





"Hmm."

They both put hands to mouths and groaned, grappling with the problem. They could hear the conversation going on behind Reine.

"Oh! So I just pick what I want to eat from this book?"

"Yeah, exactly."

"Where's the *kinako* bun? Don't they have those?"

"Ah, actually, they don't. And didn't you already have your fill at the first bakery?"

"I want more. What exactly is that powder? It's a powerfully addictive substance... If they're not careful about how they release that into the world, you'll have real problems. People will be shaking from withdrawal. They'll go to war over this *kinako*, make no mistake."

"Yeah, no."

"Mm, well, fine. I suppose I'll break ground on a new flavor."

"Yeah, yeah. I don't have any money, though, so keep it under three thousand yen."

"Mm? What's that?"

"I'm telling you I don't have any more money because you're going around eating everything in sight!"

"Mph, life is tough. I guess I've got no choice. Just wait a second. I shall procure some currency."

"W-wait! What are you planning to do?!"

Kotori sighed and pulled the black ribbons out of her pocket to tie up her hair. It was her own way of changing her mindset. With this, she transitioned from Shido's adorable little sister to commander mode.

She opened her phone and connected with the Ratatoskr line. "Mm, it's me. We've got a situation on our hands. Mission code F-08, Operation Tengu Holiday. Take emergency positions."

Reine's face twitched, but she waited until Kotori was done with her call before speaking. "...You're raring to go?"

"Yes." Kotori nodded. "In this situation, we can't give him

any instructions. We've got no other options."

"...I suppose. Given this situation...I guess it would be Route C? Hmm, well then, I'll get moving. I'll go and talk to the shop owner right now."

"Please." Kotori pulled a Chupa Chups out of her pocket and popped it into her mouth.



"..."

Shido let out a sigh as he looked back and forth between the number on the piece of paper in his hand and the contents of his wallet. He had just barely enough to cover the bill.

"C'mon, let's go, Tohka."

"Hmm? Already?" Tohka asked, her eyes wide.

Shido stood up to encourage her. If they stayed any longer, the only paths left open to them would be washing dishes to pay back the overcharge or dining and dashing.

He walked over to the register, with Tohka trailing behind him. She wasn't radiating her earlier hostility toward the other customers. She seemed to have gotten used to being in a town full of people. That was a relief, at any rate. At the register, he handed over the check and the three bills that made up 90 percent of his cash on hand.

"Can you ring us up?" Shido asked the clerk standing behind the counter. He then frowned hard as he took a step back.

That was because the clerk...

"...Certainly, right away."

...was an excessively sleepy-looking woman with dark circles under her eyes who he had seen before.

"Wh—?! Wh-wh-wh-wh-wha...?"

"Hmm? What's wrong, Shido? An enemy?!" Tohka turned a battle-ready face toward him when she saw he was

obviously confused.

"No, not an enemy...", he told her lifelessly.

In a sickly cute uniform with a bear on her shoulder, Reine's sleepy eyes shone sharply as she stared at Shido. For a second, he thought her look said, "If you tell anyone I'm working here, I'll kill you," but he quickly realized that wasn't it.

"...Here's your change and your receipt."

While he stood there shocked, Reine deftly finished the transaction and passed over the receipt, tapping on the paper.

At the bottom of the receipt were the words *We've got your back. Continue your date as naturally as you can.*

So the look she had just given him was not to let Tohka know that they knew each other, but rather to tell him to keep going with the date.

"O-oh, it's nothing," Shido said to Tohka before stuffing the receipt in his pocket.

Reine's sharpened gaze returned to her usual spaced-out look. She took a piece of colorful paper out from under the cash register and handed it to him.

"...This is a ticket for the shopping district lottery. They're drawing lots nearby. Turn right when you head outside and then continue straight. Please *try your luck* if you'd like."

She told him the specifics of the location and overemphasized the last part of her sentence.

Shido scratched his head. "If you'd like" clearly meant "go there."

However, it might have been better if she hadn't pushed it quite so hard.

"Shido, what's that?" Tohka was staring at the lottery ticket with interest.

"You want to go check it out?" he asked.

"Do *you* want to go, Shido?"

"...Yeah, I can hardly wait to go."

“Then let’s go.” Tohka bounded out of the café cheerily. After bowing slightly to Reine, Shido followed her.

“Nice work, Reine.” Kotori stood up from where she was hiding behind the counter after confirming that the pair had left the shop.

“...I’ll never get used to this,” Reine said in a monotone, holding up the hem of the excessively frilly uniform.

This was mission code F-08, Operation Tengu Holiday.

In the event that a Spirit slipped past their sensors and made contact with Shido, the crew of Ratatoskr would mix in with the residents of the neighborhood and provide backup from behind the scenes. They had considered each and every possibility and broken them up into detailed subgroups, leading to over one thousand mission codes. For this purpose, every crew member had taken at least a month of acting lessons.

“Looks good on you, though. Very cute,” Kotori said, sucking on a lollipop, and then opened her phone and made a call.

“Mm, it’s me. They left the café... Yes, as naturally as possible. I’ll flay you if you fail.” She clearly communicated her business and the penalty and then hung up. “Looks like team two are on standby. Now, let’s get back to *Fraxinus*. Even if we can’t hear them talking, we have to keep watch on the video.”

“...Right, let’s go.”

Kotori grinned. “Let’s get our *date* started—and let the war commence.”

“Umm, the lottery... Is that it?”

When Shido and Tohka left the café and walked down the street, they saw a large lottery machine set up on top of a

table covered in a red cloth. A man in a *happi* coat was standing at the machine, while another was at the prize area. Behind them were prizes like a bicycle and bags of rice. There were already a few people in line in front of the table.

“...” Shido scratched his cheek.

He vaguely remembered all of them. He was sure the men in the *happi* coats were people he’d seen inside of *Fraxinus*, but so were the customers.

“Oh!”

Tohka was unaware of any of this. Her eyes shone as she clutched the lottery ticket she’d gotten from Shido (or rather, that he’d asked her to hang on to because she kept eyeing it).

“C’mon, let’s line up.”

“Mm.” Tohka nodded, and they joined the end of the line. She bobbed her head up, down, and around to the sides to get a better look at the customers ahead of them as they turned the handle of the lottery machine.

Soon, it was their turn. Copying the person ahead of her, Tohka handed their ticket to the clerk and placed her hand on the lottery machine.

Looking closely, Shido saw that the clerk was Bad Marriage Kawagoe.

“So I just have to turn this?” she asked and made the machine spin around, the balls inside clattering. A few seconds later, a red ball popped out—a loser.

“That’s too bad. Red means a pack of tiss—,” Shido started to say, but Kawagoe swung the bell in his hand back and forth, making it clang loudly.

“We’ve got a winner!” he shouted.

“Oh!” Tohka cried.

“H-huh...?” Shido frowned, but then he saw the clerk behind Kawagoe coloring over the gold ball in the “No. 1” position on the prize board with a red marker.

“Congratulations!” Kawagoe cried. “Number one means

a pair of free tickets for Dreamland!”

“Ooh!” Tohka accepted the tickets, eyes sparkling. “What’s that, Shido?!”

“A theme park, maybe? I’ve never heard that name, though...”

Kawagoe leaned in quite close. “There’s a map on the back of the tickets. So please enjoy yourselves! You can go as early as...now!”

“...S-sure.” Shido stepped back, slightly overwhelmed, and turned a ticket over in his hand. There was indeed a map there. Apparently, this Dreamland was right nearby.

“Was there a theme park there before...?” He was having trouble making sense of the current scenario, but well, it was an order from Ratatoskr. He wondered what they’d find there.

“You want to go check it out, Tohka?”

“Mm-hmm!”

She seemed on board, so he decided to head in that direction.

The place was really close. Down an alley from the lottery and a few hundred meters away. There were still mixed-use buildings on either side, so he found it very hard to believe that they would find a theme park anywhere near here.

However.

“Ooh! Shido! There’s a castle!” Tohka pointed ahead, more excited than ever. “Are we going there?!”

Ridiculous, he thought, looking up from the back of the ticket.

He froze in place.

Although it was small, he did indeed see a Western-style castle ahead of them. The sign even read DREAMLAND. Below that were the words: REST FOR 2 HOURS STARTING AT 4,000 YEN. STAY THE NIGHT FOR 8,000 YEN.

Basically, it was a love hotel. Adults only.

“L-let’s go back, Tohka...!” he said. “I’m a total doofus. I

took us down the wrong road!”

“Hmm?” She frowned. “That’s not it?”

“Uh-huh. C-c’mon! Let’s hurry back.”

“We’re not going to stop in there? I want to go inside.”

“...N-no, no, no. Not today! Okay?!”

“Mmph... I see,” Tohka said regretfully.

He felt bad, but there was absolutely no way they could go inside a love hotel.

He glared up at Kotori, certain she was watching the whole thing play out from the sky, before turning back the way they had come.

“Honestly! He gets all the way there and then pulls back?” Kotori shrugged with a sigh, seated in the captain’s chair on *Fraxinus*. “Frankly, he’s such a wuss, even if he is my brother.”

“...Well, it was inevitable. That was a tough one to handle,” Reine said, seated on the deck below as she threw up the numbers from her analysis on-screen, which indicated much more stable values than the previous day.

Even if they weren’t quite lovers, the data indicated that Tohka considered Shido a friend.

That was exactly why Kotori had gone and tried the full-court press.

“Even if they didn’t go all the way, if we could’ve gotten a kiss at least, that would’ve been *checkmate*,” she said, flicking the stick of her lollipop back and forth.

“...What’ll we do next?” Reine asked.

“Hmm, right. How about we go with Linking and Maze?”

“Haah... Haah.”

Although he hadn’t been running, Shido was strangely out of breath. Once they came out onto the street lined with

its many shops, he slackened his pace.

"Are you feeling sick, Shido?"

"Not exactly..."

"Then what's wrong?" Tohka asked, cocking her head to one side.

"...I was just thinking about my little sister up in the heavens for a second."

"Up in the heavens?" Tohka looked somewhat surprised at this new information.

"Yeah, she was my adorable little sister."

I never dreamed she had this dual personality, he lamented.

"Oh yeah...?" Tohka looked serious for some reason.

Shido realized with a gasp that he'd accidentally made it sound like Kotori was dead. "Oh, uh, you've got the wrong idea, Tohka. She's—"

"Have some tissues!" A woman was suddenly in front of them, shoving a packet at him.

He automatically reached out to accept them, and the woman bowed slightly and walked off somewhere.

"Shido? What's that?"

"Oh, they're pocket tissues—," he started and then stopped.

Normally, people gave out free tissues on the streets to advertise various companies. On this package, there was only an illustration of a boy and a girl holding hands, with the phrase *If you're happy, hold hands*. Was it for some kind of religious group?

He heard a familiar voice from the electronics shop to his right.

A strange program was playing on the TVs at the front of the store.

"Wha...?!" Shido cried, frowning.

Several pundit-ish sort of people were on-screen sitting at what looked like the set of an afternoon talk show, but they were all faces he'd seen on *Fraxinus*.

"You know, I really hate it when you don't even get to hold hands on the first date!"

"Yes, exactly. If you're a man, you've got to get in there and go for it."

"..." Shido was silent.

Suddenly, it seemed couples were all around them. It was almost weird that there were so many of them, all holding hands fondly and cooing clearly scripted lines like, "Holding hands is great!" and "It's like our hearts are communicating!"

He felt like he was experiencing a dizzy spell and brought a hand to his forehead. *This must be their doing again.*

With a long sigh, he put the tissues in his pocket and looked at Tohka as he tried to calm the pounding of his heart. "H-hey, Tohka...?"

"Mm? What?"

"Uh, do you want to...hold hands?" He swallowed hard before extending a hand.

"Hold hands? Why?" she asked, almost disgusted. He could practically see a big question mark floating near her head.

This was more embarrassing than just getting rejected.

"...Right. I wonder why."

It wasn't something he could actually explain. Looking anywhere but at her, he pulled his hand—

"Mm."

Well, he was *about* to pull his hand back when Tohka took it in her own.

"...!" He looked at her, stunned.

"Mm? What's with that look? You said you wanted to hold hands."

"Y-yeah." He shook his head slightly, and they started to walk.

"Mm. It's not too bad, this hand-holding thing," she observed, smiling, and gripped his hand a tiny bit more

tightly.

“...N-not bad at all.”

Her hand was small, soft, and a little cooler than his, slightly chilly to the touch. He felt his face turning red and tried to think of something else to keep himself from focusing too much on this sensation.

After they'd been walking for a bit, he saw a black-and-yellow sign indicating that there was construction up ahead. Men in helmets were hard at work.

“Oops. I guess we can't go through here. We'll just have to...” Shido turned to the right, and now there was a sign prohibiting entry to that road as well. “Uh?”

He found this strange, but he had no other choice than to go back down the way they'd come. Except that now a sign blocked the road that they had just been walking down.

“...”

This was simply too unnatural. Shido narrowed his eyes and stared at the faces of the workers.

Just as he'd suspected, he knew several of them. The crew of *Fraxinus*.

Without a word, Shido turned his eyes to the road stretching out to their left, which led to higher ground. This was the only one that was open.

“...So you're saying to go this way, huh?”

“Hmm? What's the matter, Shido?”

“Oh, nothing... Anyway, how about we go this way?”

“Mm. Sure,” she assented, looking like she was having fun just walking. “Okay, let's go!”

“Y-yeah...” He started to walk with her awkwardly down the road to the left.

Chapter 5

Savage Sandalphon

The time was six PM. The orange light of the evening sun illuminated the cluster of buildings in front of Tengu Station.

A boy and a girl walked through the small park up on high with an exquisite view of this scene. There was nothing particularly special about the boy. He was an average high school student. But the girl...

"Heh." Ryouko Kusakabe licked her lips as she narrowed her eyes. "Ninety-eight point five percent match. This is definitely no coincidence."

A Spirit. A world-killing catastrophe. A young woman of the same type of the ultimate, evil calamity that scorched this very planet thirty years earlier and caused a large fire five years prior.

"..."

However, the figure Ryouko had her eyes on was just a cute girl at the moment.

"Permission to shoot?" came a quiet—or rather, penetratingly cold—voice from behind Ryouko.

She didn't need to look back to know it was Origami.

Like Ryouko, she was wearing a wiring suit with a thruster unit, and in her right hand, she held Cry Cry Cry, an anti-Spirit rifle as long as she was tall.

“...Hasn’t come down yet,” Ryouko told her. “They said to remain on standby. The bigwigs are probably still discussing it.”

“Oh.” Origami nodded, seeming neither relieved nor dejected.

Ten AST members, including Ryouko and Origami, were standing by in two-person cells in a one-kilometer circle from the park where the Spirit was. Their cell was on a plateau currently being developed into a residential area even farther off from the city than the park. Although trucks and cranes came and went constantly during the day, it was quiet at this time in the evening.

A few hours earlier, the brass had decided that yes, the girl Origami saw was a Spirit, and they’d given permission to launch the CR units immediately.

Apparently, the minister of defense or the chief of staff or someone was still uncertain about what exactly they should do. Their options were basically to launch an attack or hold off.

No spacequake had been detected, so the alarm was silent, which meant that none of the residents had evacuated. If the Spirit ran wild now, they’d suffer serious casualties.

That said, however, sounding the alarm now was likely to incite the Spirit, which was definitely not good. The situation was not ideal.

However...

“This is a good opportunity,” Origami said, her tone as dispassionate as usual.

Just as she noted, this was also a chance for them—because the Spirit hadn’t materialized her Astral Dress. She wasn’t wearing the external shell that turned the Spirit into a powerful, ultimate, peerless creature, the way the Territories did for Ryouko and her team. It was plenty possible that they could actually hit her if they struck now.

Unfortunately, this was a possibility at best. They needed

to deliver a lethal blow with one strike, which was why Origami was carrying the nonstandard equipment of the anti-Spirit rifle.

The gunner cried out, the projectile squealed, and the target shrieked in the agony of death. Thus: Cry Cry Cry. Or CCC, for short. The gun had such powerful recoil that it would break the shooter's arm and knock their wits right out of their head if their Territory wasn't deployed.

Ryouko didn't really think they would get to use such a powerful weapon. "I wonder if the bigwigs would actually give us permission to fire in this situation, since they're on the fence."

"If they don't, we've got a problem," Origami replied.

"...Well, given the sitch, that's true," Ryouko agreed. "But I think it has to do with who's responsible for what. Like, what happens if we get permission to shoot, but we can't take her out with one shot, so the Spirit runs wild? And can we claim we didn't know she was here, even if she's wreaking havoc in our world?"

"If that's how they make their decision, we've got a problem."

Ryouko shrugged. "A lot of them value their own position over a bunch of lives."

The look on Origami's face didn't change in the slightest, but she gave off an air of indignation.

Then Ryouko heard a voice mixed in with static in her ear. "Yeah, yeah, this is Point Alpha. What'd they—huh?" Her eyes widened at the information transmitted to her ear. "Roger that," she said and ended the communication.

"...That's a shock," she told Origami. "They gave permission to fire."

She honestly hadn't expected this. She'd assumed they'd be ordered to remain on standby.

Actually, now that she was thinking about it, the order to attack the school the previous day had also been a drastic measure, something that would have once been almost

unthinkable. Had there been some reshuffling in the positions of the higher-ups?

Well, Ryouko would just do her job. To be more specific, she would entrust the trigger to the squad member who had the highest probability of success in this mission.

"Origami, go ahead and take the shot. You're best suited to it of all the crew we got here. Failure is not an option. You must take her down with one shot."

"Roger," Origami replied without any emotion whatsoever.



There wasn't a soul besides Shido and Tohka in the park, which was colored by the twilight sun. The space was quiet. All they could hear were the cars in the distance and the cawing of crows.

"Ooh! What a view!" Tohka leaned over the guardrail that prevented people from falling as she looked out on the city of Tengu in the dusky light.

Following the route so cleverly (?) laid out by the *Fraxinus* crew, they'd reached this park with its wonderful view just as the sun was starting to set. It wasn't the first time Shido had been here. It was actually secretly one of his favorite places. Surely Kotori chose this as the end point for their date.

"Shido! How does that transform?!" Tohka pointed at a train running in the distance, eyes shining.

"Unfortunately, the train doesn't transform," he told her.

"What? So it's a fusion type?"

"Well, it does connect to other cars."

"Ooh." She nodded with a strange acceptance and whirled around to face Shido, leaning back against the railing. With the twilight sky behind her, she was indeed gorgeous, like something out of a painting.

"Still." Tohka stretched and changed the subject, a carefree smile on her face. "It's pretty sweet, this date thing, huh? It's actually, like, kinda fun."

"...Ngh." Shido was caught off guard by this. He couldn't see it himself, but he was sure his cheeks were turning red.

"What's wrong, Shido? Your face is all red."

"...Just the sun playing tricks on you," he said, looking down.

"Oh yeah?" She came over to his side and peered at his face, looking up from below.

"Ee—!" he yelped.

"It is really red. Some kind of disease?" she asked, so close that he could feel her breath.

"Uh... N-no. That's not...it..."

Even as he averted his eyes, the word *date* flooded his head. He knew about them from manga and movies. Usually, if a couple came to this kind of lovely place at the end of a date, they'd—

His eyes naturally found her soft lips.

"Mm?"

"—!"

She hadn't said anything in particular, but he felt like she could see right through to his wicked heart. He pulled back from her, looking away again.

"Huh. You're so fidgety."

"Sh-shut up..." Shido glanced at her face as he wiped away the sweat beading up on his forehead with his sleeve.

The gloomy look that had been on her face ten days earlier and the day before had largely faded. He let out a sigh, took a step back, and turned to face her again.

"So? No one tried to kill you, right?"

"...Mm. Everyone was nice. So nice that I still can't believe it, to be honest."

"Oh...?"

"That many people not rejecting me. I mean, just not denying me." Tohka smiled with a self-deprecating edge.

"Those mech-heads... Umm, what were they called? Aay...?"

"You mean the AST?" he asked.

"Yeah, that. If you told me that all the people here are working with them and trying to trick me, it'd feel more real."

"Whoa, whoa..."

Her thoughts really did leap to extremes, but he couldn't laugh at this one. After all, for Tohka, that was the norm. Being turned away, continually rejected, was her reality. It was...really sad.

"So then that would make me one of the AST, too?" he inquired.

"Nah." She shook her head back and forth. "If I had to say, you'd be the one working against your will, threatened by your parents or your siblings or someone being held hostage."

"Wh-where'd that come from?"

"...Don't make me imagine you as an enemy."

"Huh?" he asked.

"Nothing."

Now it was Tohka turning away from him. She rubbed her face with her hands as though she was trying to force a different expression onto it before turning her gaze back toward him.

"But today has meant a lot to me. I never dreamed the world could be...this kind, this fun, this beautiful."

"Oh. Yeah?" Shido's mouth relaxed, and he let out a sigh.

"And..." She knit her brows together, a slight smile curling up on her lips. "...I sort of understand what those guys—those AST—are thinking."

"Huh...?" He made a puzzled face, and Tohka's eyes grew a little sad.

It was not quite the same as the expression of gloom he so hated, but it had a tragic air that made his heart constrict in his chest just looking at her face.

"Every time," she started slowly, "I appeared in his

world, I destroyed something so wonderful.”

“—!” He gasped. “B-but it’s not like you’re doing it on purpose!”

“...Mm... I have no control over whether or not I appear or what happens when I do.”

“So then—”

“But that doesn’t change the fact that for the residents of this world, the end result is destruction. I finally understand why the AST are trying to kill me.”

He didn’t know how to respond. The pained look on her face was ripping his heart in half, and he was finding it hard to breathe.

“Shido, it would be better if I didn’t exist,” Tohka said and smiled.

Not the innocent smile he’d caught glimpses of that day, but a weak, pained smile, like that of a sick patient who understands the end is near.

He gulped hard. At some point, his throat had grown bone-dry. As he painfully felt the moisture seeping into his tense esophagus, he managed to pry his mouth open somehow.

“That’s not...true...!” he said forcefully and balled his hands into fists. “I mean...there was no spacequake today, was there?! I just know something is different from usual today! If we can figure that out...!”

Tohka slowly shook her head. “Even if we did find some other way, it wouldn’t stop whatever presence is sending me here at irregular intervals. I would still appear here just as often.”

“Then...!” he shouted. “Don’t go back there!”

She lifted her face, her eyes wide, as if this idea had never occurred to her. “That...isn’t... possible...”

“Have you tried?!” he demanded. “Even once?!”

“...” She pursed her lips and fell silent.

Shido pressed a hand to his chest in an attempt to right his abnormal heartbeat as he coated his throat with saliva

once again. He had shouted the words in the spur of the moment, but if it *were* possible, then the spacequakes would no longer happen.

According to Kotori, the spacequakes were the aftermath of the Spirit moving from some other location into this world. If Tohka was pulled here at irregular intervals through no will of her own, then all she had to do was stay here forever, and everything would be fine.

"B-but I just—There are so many things I don't know, you know?" she protested.

"I'll teach you everything!" he replied instantly.

"I'll need food and a place to sleep."

"We'll figure that out, too!"

"Some unexpected things might happen."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it!"

Tohka fell silent briefly before parting her lips. "...Are you sure it's okay for me to live?"

"Yeah!"

"Is it okay for me to exist in this world?"

"It is!"

"...I'm sure you're the only one who would say that, Shido. I mean, the AST would obviously hate it if someone who posed a threat was living in their space. Even the other people would oppose the idea."

"Who cares about the AST?! Or other people?! If all of them are gonna reject you, then I'll *accept* you so completely, it cancels all of them out!" he shouted and suddenly reached a hand out to her.

Tohka's shoulders shook slightly.

"Take it! That's all you need to do...for now...!"

She dropped her head, and after a few seconds of silent thought, she slowly lifted her face and tentatively reached out her hand. "Shido..."

"—"

Just as their hands were about to touch, Shido's fingertips twitched, and he felt an arctic chill for some

strange reason. It was an unpleasant sensation, like being licked all over by a sandpaper tongue.

“Tohka!” Even though he hadn’t consciously intended to call out to her, his throat shouted her name.

“...Ngh!” Before she could respond, he shoved her as hard as he could.

The slender girl tumbled backward at the sudden shock, like something out of a manga.

“—Ah.” Not even a heartbeat later, he felt something burst through the place between his chest and his stomach.

“Wh-what are you doing?!” Tohka cried out, covered in dirt, but replying to her was beyond him at the moment.

He couldn’t breathe. It was also hard to stay conscious and on his feet. At any rate. He felt...bad...

“Shido?” Tohka asked in a daze.

Trying to find out what was wrong, he put a shaking hand to his side.

Weird.

It was like...there was nothing there to...

“Ah...” Origami heard herself gasp as she watched the silhouette of Shido crumple with vision enhanced by her Territory.

She froze for a few seconds, still pressed to the ground, flattened on the residential development project, the anti-Spirit rifle CCC still in her hands.

A few seconds earlier, when Origami launched the CCC Realizer, the special warhead loaded in it had been given an attack field, and she had pulled the trigger only after she had her target perfectly in her sights. Everything had been in perfect alignment.

If only Shido hadn’t pushed the Spirit out of the way.

The bullet she fired had ripped cleanly through him instead of the girl.

“—”

She opened her mouth, but this time, no voice came out. She could tell that her finger, the finger on the trigger, was trembling very slightly.

...Because I just did that to Shido—

“Origami!”

“—Ngh!” Ryouko’s voice brought her back to herself.

“Throw your pity party later! I’ll ream you out until you die! Right now—” She glared at the park with trepidation. “You have to focus on surviving!”

“Shido...?” Tohka called but got no response.

And why would she? There was a hole in Shido’s chest bigger than her hand.

Everything was jumbled in her mind, and she couldn’t understand what any of this meant.

“Shiiiiidoooo.” She knelt down beside his head and poked his cheek. She got no reaction.

The hand that had been stretched out toward her only a few seconds earlier was covered in blood.

“Unh... Ah... Aah... Aaah...” After a few seconds, her head began to digest what had happened.

She knew this scorched scent hanging over the area. It was the smell of that group that always tried to kill her—the AST. A single, polished blow. *That girl* had likely delivered it.

However powerful Tohka might have been, if she had taken that hit without her Astral Dress, she wouldn’t have gotten away unscathed. If Shido had taken an attack like that with absolutely no defenses...

“—”

Feeling dizzy, Tohka placed her hand on Shido’s eyes, which were still staring up at the sky, and slowly closed them. Then, she took off the blazer she was wearing and laid it gently over his body.

She got to her feet and turned her face to the sky.

Aah, aah.

It was no use. It wasn't meant to be, after all.

For a brief moment, she had thought she might be able to live in this world. She had thought it might somehow work out if Shido was with her. She had thought it would be incredibly difficult—but that she might be able to pull it off.

However... Aah...

However...it wasn't meant to be, after all.

This world did indeed reject her. And in the worst, cruelest way possible!

"Adonai Melek—Astral Dress Number Ten!" She managed to squeeze the name out. Her Astral Dress. It was absolute, powerful. It was Tohka's *Territory*.

Instantly, the world cried out. The scenery around her bent and twisted, wrapped around her body, and took on the shape of her magnificent Astral Dress.

Colored in this skirt made of a shining film of light, the catastrophe descended—creaking, squalling.

The air squealed, as if singing its dissatisfaction with Tohka's sudden materialization of her Astral Dress.

She lowered her eyes. The person who shot Shido was on that plateau, flat like the top of a mountain had been carved away. A person *worth killing* was there.

She dug her heels into the earth, and a throne rose up from the ground with a massive sword sheathed in it.

Wham! Tohka kicked at the ground, put a foot on the throne's armrest, and pulled the sword out of the backrest.

"Aah."

She cried.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

It was loud enough to reach the heavens.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

It grew intense enough to make the ground rumble.

She felt her heart grow numb, crushing the ego inside her.

“How dare you—!”

Her eyes were moist.

“How dare you! How dare you! How-dare-you-how-dare-you-how-dare-you-how-dare-you-how-dare-you—!!”

Clutching the sword in her hand even more tightly, Tohka *killed the distance* between them—between herself and the point where her gaze was focused.

“Wha—?!”

“—”

In less than the blink of an eye, she shifted to the plateau she had been looking at. In front of her were a woman with her eyes wide open in disbelief and a girl with no expression on her face.

“Sandalphon—Final Sword: Halvanhelev!!”

Cracks raced through the throne under Tohka’s foot, and then the whole thing crumbled into pieces. The fragments swirled up to wrap around her sword, turning it into something even larger, a weapon that was beyond massive at a total length of more than ten meters.

Tohka brandished it nimbly and swung it down toward the two girls.

The light of the sword grew even brighter and, in an instant, extended out from the blade and crawled along the ground.

The area exploded.

“Wh—?!”

“—Ngh.”

The two women cried out in trepidation as they leaped

aside in the nick of time.

It was only right that they dodged. With just one blow, Tohka cleaved a broad swath of land in two.

"You...monster!" the taller woman shouted and started to come at Tohka, wielding something that looked like a crude sword.

Such a weapon could never touch Tohka, not when she was clad in her Astral Dress. She simply turned her gaze on the woman and made the attack vanish.

"No way." The woman's face was racked with despair.

However, Tohka was not interested in her. She turned her eyes on the girl. "Aah. It's you. It's you," she said quietly. "You were the one who killed my friend—my good friend, Shido."

For the first time, the expression on the girl's face twisted, albeit only the slightest bit.

That didn't matter, however. There wasn't a thing in this world that could stop Tohka once she'd called Halvanhelev. Looking down at the girl with pitch-black eyes, she *raged with composure*.

"I will kill, destroy, and slaughter you completely. Fail. Perish. Die."



"Commander!"

"I know," Kotori replied to her flustered subordinate, twirling the lollipop in her mouth. "Don't freak out. You're not a monkey in heat."

The *Fraxinus* bridge. Displayed on the monitor in front of her were Shido on the ground with a chunk ripped out of him and the battle of the Spirit Tohka.

It wasn't that Kotori didn't understand why her subordinate was upset. The situation was overwhelmingly, absolutely, devastatingly despairing.

The spacequake alarm had finally started to sound, but the residents' evacuation was nowhere near finished when the battle between Tohka and the AST began. The sole saving grace was that they were fighting in an area under development, so no one lived there yet.

Tohka's first blow easily shattered that bit of optimism.

It had been such a transcendently destructive force that it made the Spirit's attacks up to that point seem almost kittenish.

With a single strike, she had split that expansive development area in two and created a ravine in the center.

Then there was the sudden death of Shido Itsuka, who was supposed to have been Ratatoskr's ultimate weapon.

Kotori and her crew had been placed in the worst possible position.

"Well, the move *does* lack grace, but I suppose he gets a passing grade as a knight... If this had killed his 'princess,' we'd be looking at total failure here," Kotori said, not looking particularly serious as she flicked the lollipop stick.

The crew turned their gazes on her in trepidation.

That much was to be expected. Her brother had just died, after all.

Reine and Kannazuki alone reacted differently.

Reine was calmly monitoring Tohka's battle and collecting data, while Kannazuki looked strange somehow. A flush crept over his cheeks, and drool trickled out of his mouth. From the look of him, he was thinking something along the lines of, *Aah, a hole that large ripped into your body... Must be amazing. M-must be incredible. B-but it's pointless if you die.*

"Hey." Kotori kicked Kannazuki in the shin and stood up.

"Haah?!" he yelped.

"Listen." She narrowed her eyes and snorted as she told the crew, "Keep doing your jobs. This isn't the end for Shido, right?"

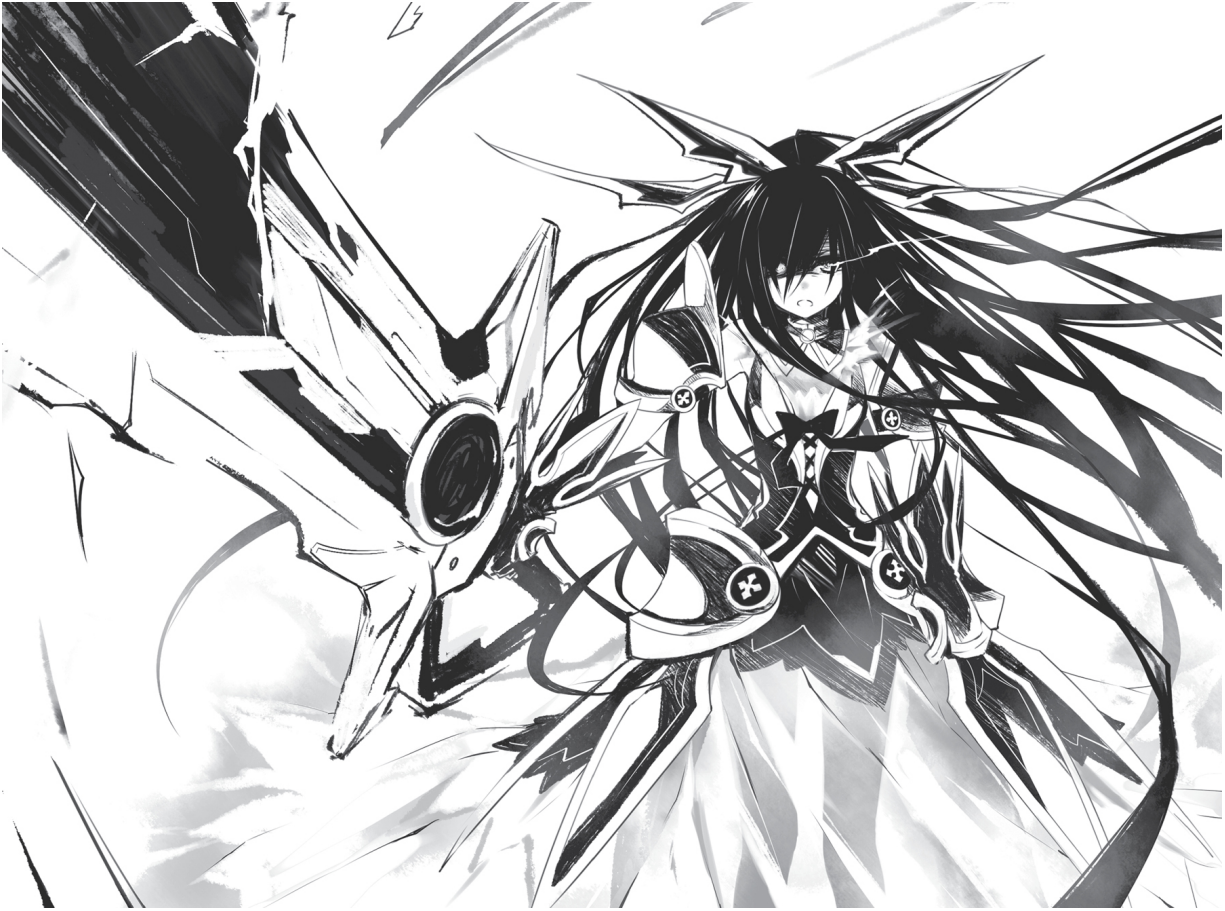
Right. His actual job had only just begun.

“C-Commander! It’s—!” A subordinate on the lower deck cried out, stunned, pointing at the left side of the screen, which displayed the park.

“There we go.” Kotori grinned and moved her lollipop to the other side of her mouth.

Shido was in the center of the screen, lying in the park with the blazer laid over him. Except flames were suddenly rising up from that blazer. It wasn’t because the Spirit’s life force in it had been lost or because the sun had set it on fire.

After all, it wasn’t the blazer that was burning.



The crew of *Fraxinus* cried out in amazement again.

"H-his wound—"

Yes, the gaping hole in his midsection was on fire. The flame blazed so high, it blocked out the area of the wound itself and then steadily weakened, leaving a smooth scar behind. Shido's body was completely restored.

"...Mm." Shido lay on-screen.

"Mm... O-ow!! *That's hot!*" He saw the flames still smoldering on his stomach and bounced up. He hurriedly slapped at himself to put the fire out. "*So—h-huh? I... Why?*"

A huge commotion rose up on the bridge.

"Wha—? C-Commander, this—"

"I told you," Kotori said, licking her lips. "If Shido dies, we can just start a new game."

The crew all turned disbelieving eyes on her, but she ignored them.

"Pick him up. Shido's the only one who can stop her."



I don't get it.

Shido gave his stomach several inquisitive pats. There was a clean hole in both the blazer and shirt he was wearing, and his necktie had been partially cut off. But he wasn't concerned about this embarrassing outfit at the moment. He had something much more pressing to attend to.

"How...am I alive?" he murmured, touching himself again.

He'd had a horrible feeling and shoved Tohka. In the next instant, there'd been a hole where his stomach was, and he'd passed out.

There were big holes in his clothes. They were also stained with a lot of blood. It definitely hadn't been a

dream.

“Right. Tohka!”

He was certain that hit had been meant for her. What had happened to her? He scanned the area, looking for the Spirit.

Suddenly, black light jetted from the plateau above, followed by a tremendous roar and a shock wave.

“Whoa?!” Caught entirely off guard, he fell to the ground, blown back by the wind. “Wh-what the—?!”

He looked up and froze.

The plateau looked a lot different now than it had before he lost consciousness. The terrain in that direction was basically pristine mountains, unchanged in the past thirty years, with the residential development site nestled in there. Now those mountains were crumbling, rocks tumbling from the face, as if an air raid was underway.

Wait. That wasn’t quite right. He could see several sharp cross sections, as if the mountains had been sliced into over and over with a giant sword.

“That’s...,” he murmured, dazed, and then felt all the weight leave his body. “Hngh...!”

It wasn’t the first time he’d felt this sensation. By the time Shido realized it was the *Fraxinus* transit device, his view had changed from the park on high to the interior of the vessel.

“This way!” the crew member waiting there called.

“Uh, uh-huh.” Slightly confused, Shido was yanked onto the bridge.

“How do you feel upon awakening, Shido?” Kotori asked from her captain’s chair on the upper deck of the bridge as she flicked her Chupa Chups stick around.

“...Kotori.” He smacked his ringing ears and frowned. “... I kind of can’t get a grip on the situation. What happened, exactly?”

“Mm. You got hit with an AST attack, so the princess lost it, and now she’s trying to kill the AST.” Kotori flicked a

finger upward at the large bridge monitor.

"Nn—wha...?"

Shido watched as Tohka swung a massive sword on the display and sliced through the mountains while the AST fought back. Actually, he couldn't really call it fighting back.

The AST were launching incredibly powerful attacks, but not so much as a speck of dust was reaching Tohka. Even though she wasn't landing any direct hits, the mere aftermath of her slashing was throwing the wizards' flight off course as though their Territories did not exist, knocking them back easily.

It was the overwhelmingly one-sided march of a champion.

"She's completely lost it," Kotori told him, shrugging. "She really couldn't forgive them for killing you."

"What the—? That's...!" Shido shouted. "And wait! How am I alive?!"

Kotori grinned meaningfully and then turned her eyes toward Tohka on the monitor. "We'll talk about that later. We've got other things to take care of right now."

"Other things?"

"Yes. We'd really prefer to avoid human injury with the Spirits."

"...Well, obviously!"

"Okay! There's our good little knight. So off you go. To stop the princess, right?" Kotori narrowed her eyes, like she was really enjoying herself, and then called out in a strident voice, "*Fraxinus*, turn back! Move to the battle point! Keep the error to less than a meter!"

"Roger!" Several crew members—apparently pilots—called out as one.

Then with a leaden rumble, *Fraxinus* shuddered.

"K-Kotori!" Shido exclaimed.

"Hmm? What?"

"You said stop Tohka. Can we even do that?!"

"What are you talking about? It's not a matter of *can*, it's

do. It's up to you, Shido." She shot him a look of exasperation.

"M-me?!"

"Of course. How long are you going to be all wishy-washy here? You're the only one who can stop her."

"B-but how exactly?!" asked Shido, sweat beading on his forehead.

Kotori pulled the Chupa Chups out of her mouth, a devilish grin crossing her lips. "Don't you know? There's only one way to rescue a cursed princess, isn't there?" She puckered her lips and planted a kiss on her lollipop.



The situation was extremely bad. All ten standby members of the AST were fighting, but they hadn't been able to get close to the Spirit, much less injure her. The Spirit didn't even seem to see anyone other than Origami, like a lion who didn't think about the ants she crushed under her feet.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!" the Spirit roared, her face wet with tears and her voice thick with rage, and brought down her massive sword.

"...Gah!" Origami fired her thruster to twist and escape into the sky, dodging the blow. But the shock wave from the sword invaded her Territory and hit her hard. "Ngh...!"

Her guard was down for a mere instant.

"Aaaaaaaaaah!" the Spirit howled and swung with all her might, slicing through the wind to come at Origami again.

"*Origami!*" Ryouko shouted, panicked. But it was too late. The Spirit's sword touched Origami's Territory.

"—"

Origami learned she'd been too optimistic. She thought she had calculated the rough force of the aftermath of the sword, but she'd been wrong. It was clear they were from

different worlds.

The Spirit's attack was like the iron hammer of a tyrannical king, so strong that it felt like blasphemy to even compare it with her own power, to even think about an attack strategy.

In terms of time, it was a mere 1.5 seconds.

Her Territory...

"—"

Origami's space, her absolute power, shattered without a sound, without a voice, and she was thrown down to the ground.

"Ah..."

"Origami!" Ryouko's voice sounded far off somehow.

Perhaps because Origami's Territory had been released, the burden on her brain had eased somewhat, but in exchange, every part of her body screamed in pain. She wouldn't get out of this with just a broken bone or two. Blood spilled from a wound somewhere on her body and filled the wiring suit. She moved her head—suddenly heavy, as though it had just remembered gravity—the tiniest bit.

Her vision was hazy, and the only thing she could see clearly was the Spirit standing in the sky: the tiny girl clutching a sword with a terribly sad look on her face.

"—I'm going to end you."

The Spirit raised her sword and then stopped. Particles of light popped into existence around her, shining darkly, and converged on the blade of the sword as if sucked in.

Origami didn't need anyone to explain what was happening. This blow would be the full might of the Spirit. If she got hit with that now, without her Territory deployed, she would die. She had to get away. However, racked with pain, her body was too heavy to move.

Ryouko and the other AST members had already been knocked out of the battle. There was no one left who could stop the Spirit.

The Spirit waited for the dark light to color the sword

and tightened her grip on it.

That was when...

"Toooooooooohhhhhhhkaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaa!!!"

She heard someone yelling from the sky, from even higher up than the Spirit.

"Huh?" Origami asked, stunned, even lying on death's doorstep as she was.

It was no wonder she was surprised. It was the boy she'd shot earlier.

"The princess is in the air? ...Then we'll throw Shido down from here. Parachute? He doesn't need one. We're in the lower atmosphere, and once he gets close to the Spirit, we'll neutralize gravity for him... Ohhh, mm-hmm. It's fine, all good. So long as she's directly under *Fraxinus*... What? What if she's a bit off that straight line? Hmm... Well, then a beautiful flower will bloom on the surface—a bright red one."

Kotori stared at the monitor and chuckled.

"H-hang on a sec!" Shido cried. "Why are you making this so difficult?!"

"Oh, you know, if the chances of success are the same, then the fun way is obviously better."

"You're the only one having fun here!"

"Geez, you're loud," Kotori complained. "Take him."

"Yes, ma'am!" Two brawny men appeared out of nowhere, grabbed Shido's arms, and dragged him out.

"Ah! Hey!" he yelled. "I'll remember this, Kotoriiiiii!"

"Yeah, yeah. I'll remember for you, so go on now."

Shido was led to the hatch in the lower deck.

"Luck be with you," said the men, pushing Shido out into the sky.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah?!"

The surging air made the clothes on his body as well as his cheeks flap. The sensation of being suspended above the earth very nearly made him empty his bladder. He would never be scared of a roller coaster again.

In the height of his terror, his mind very tenuously holding on to consciousness, Shido caught sight of a shadow in the center of his field of view. He thrust out his arms and legs to stabilize himself and stared at the blurry girl.

“Toooooooooohhhhhhhkaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaa!!”

He shouted her name as loudly and as long as he could.

Not even a heartbeat later, he felt the gravity on his body and the plummeting sensation weaken. Support from Ratatoskr, most likely. He was still falling, but now he could...

“—”

Tohka turned her face upward at the sound of his voice, still brandishing the massive sword. Her cheeks and the tip of her nose were bright red, and her eyes were moist. She looked rather miserable.

He met her eyes.

“Shi...do...?” she murmured uncomprehendingly.

His descent gradually slowing, he put his hands on her shoulders and stopped in midair, held up by the Spirit standing in the sky.

“H-hey...Tohka.”

“Shido...? I-is it really...you...?”

“Yeah... I think it is anyway.”

Her lips trembled. “Shido! Shido! Shido...!”

“Aah, wha—?” he started to say, and then an incredible light filled the corner of his field of view.

The sword still brandished in midair shone black, like it had changed the area to night.

“Wh-what’s that...?” he stammered.

“...! Oh no! My power—” Tohka frowned as light began to leak from the blade, and lightning bolts cut into the ground.

"T-Tohka, this—"

"I made a mistake with Halvanhelev's control...!" she cried. "I have to release the power somewhere...!"

"Somewhere?" he shouted in response. "Where?!"

"—" She looked silently at the ground.

When he followed her lead and turned his own eyes in that direction, he saw Origami lying there, battered and beaten.

"...Ngh! Tohka, you...!" He gasped. "Y-you can't release it there!"

"Th-then what am I supposed to do?! It's already in a critical state!"

Even as Tohka spoke, the sword shot black lightning out into the air.

Then Shido remembered what Kotori had said. He remembered the only way to stop Tohka and seal this power away.

"So okay, just calm down and listen."

"What?! This isn't the time—"

"There...might be...a possibility...we could do something...about that!"

"What?!" she cried. "What exactly?!"

"R-right. It's..."

He couldn't quite bring himself to say it. After all, Kotori's method was just too nonsensical, baseless, not a chance in hell...

"Hurry!" she urged him.

He made up his mind and opened his mouth. "I-it's, you know—! Tohka! Y-you have...to k-kiss me!"

"What?!" She frowned.

It was no wonder. To think he would say such a thing in a time of emergency. Of course she would think he was pulling something.

"S-sorry," he said quickly. "Just forget it. We'll try to find —"

"What's *kiss*?!"

“Huh...?”

“Hurry up and tell me!”

“...A—a kiss is, like, when you put your mouth against someone else’s—”

Without any hesitation whatsoever, Tohka pressed her pink lips against his.

“——Mm?!”

His eyes flew open, and he cried out without saying anything. Tohka’s lips were firm, soft, and even smelled sweet somehow; all these sensations mixed together to create hell and heaven in his brain. That whole thing about first kisses tasting like lemons was a lie. This one tasted like the parfait Tohka had eaten that afternoon.

An instant later, her sword cracked, crumbled, and melted away into the sky. And then the film of light that made up the dress covering Tohka’s body burst open and disappeared.

“Wha—?” she cried, baffled.

“...Ngh?! ”

Shido was the more startled of the two of them. He wasn’t surprised by the disappearance of Tohka’s sword and dress. He’d been skeptical, but Kotori had told him what would happen and what to do.

He was shocked by the way Tohka had spoken while they were still kissing, so her lips had wriggled against him, plunging him into such a state of chaos that his lexicon could no longer completely describe it.

The strength drained out of Tohka’s body, and the pair fell toward the ground. Mind hazy, Shido hesitated and then held on to her so that they didn’t separate. Weakly. Gingerly.

Head first, lips and bodies pressed together, they plunged down.

Tohka’s Astral Dress melted into particles of light, drawing out shining beams behind them. Or maybe it was an illusion. Shido didn’t have the extra brain space to give

the question any thought.

Holding Tohka, he fell slowly, twisting so that he was on the bottom when they hit the ground.

“Pwah...!” Tohka pulled her lips away as if to inhale and sat up, moving away from where she lay on top of him.

“S-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-sorry, Tohka! They told me this was the only thing I could do!” Shido leaped up immediately and jumped back while curling into a ball at the same time to perform a magnificent act of jumping prostration.

Strictly speaking, *she* had kissed *him*, but he sort of felt like that wasn’t the issue.

His head remained untrampled after a few seconds, and no curses rained down on him, either.

“...?”

Thinking this strange, he lifted his head and saw Tohka pressing a finger to her lips, a strange look on her face.

“Pwah...?!” His face turned so red, blood threatened to shoot out of his nostrils as he froze in place.

With the Astral Dress she was wearing in tatters, Tohka was half-naked.

“—Ngh!”

Seeing this reaction, she looked down at herself and then hurried to cover her breasts with her arms.

“N-n-no, I wasn’t—,” Shido started desperately.

“D-don’t look, you jerk!!” Tohka glared at him, her cheeks coloring. She might not have known the meaning of the word *kiss*, but she did appear to have a sense of shame on par with anyone else’s.

“S-sorry...!” He closed his eyes.

“That’s no good, either!” she yelled. “You’re squinting, aren’t you?!”

“S-so then what do you want me to do...?”

A few seconds later, he felt a warm sensation across his body. “Huh?” Unconsciously, he opened his eyes.

Before him were Tohka’s jet-black hair and naked shoulders. She was pressing her body tightly up against his.

“...Now you can’t see,” she told him.

“T-true...” He wondered if this was really okay, but unable to move, he simply stayed frozen in place.

“...Shido,” Tohka said after a while, in a vanishingly small voice.

“What?”

“Will you...take me on a date again...?”

“Uh-huh. Yeah. Whenever you want.” He nodded vigorously.





Final Chapter

Life with a Spirit

“...That’s everything,” Kotori said, finishing up her report on the capture and recovery of the Spirit at the round table in the center of *Fraxinus*’s dim transmission room. As commander, only she was permitted entry into this special space.

Five people were at the table, but Kotori was the only one actually aboard *Fraxinus*. The others were taking part in the meeting through speakers set on top of the round surface.

“...*So his power is real then.*” A slightly muffled voice came from an ugly stuffed cat toy to her right. The sound was actually coming from the speaker directly in front of the plush toy, but from where she sat, it looked like the ugly cat was speaking.

Since the people on the other side of these speakers didn’t have a video feed, Kotori had fixed the place up how she liked. As a result, the room in the deepest part of *Fraxinus* was bizarre and fantastical, like the Mad Hatter’s tea party from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

“I *told* you. I said Shido’d be able to do it.” Kotori crossed her arms smugly.

“*We couldn’t be certain based on your word alone.*” A quiet voice came out of the teary-eyed mouse to her left.

"We're talking about the ability to regenerate here...and the ability to absorb a Spirit's power. Such claims are impossible to believe without evidence."

Kotori shrugged. That was just the way it was.

It had taken roughly five years to confirm Shido's unique nature using a variety of measurement devices. During that time, *Fraxinus* had been built, and the crew rounded up. The timing was pretty much perfect.

"What kind of condition is the Spirit in?" The voice came from the toy next to the ugly cat, a bulldog with an extremely stupid design, complete with drool hanging from its mouth.

"We've been watching her since we recovered her with Fraxinus, and so far, she's extremely stable. We haven't measured any spacequakes. We won't know for sure until we look into how much power she has left, but at the very least, we can say it's so reduced that she's very unlikely to 'kill' the world simply by being here."

Of the four stuffed animals seated around the table, three sighed in unison.

"So then, at present, there's no issue with the Spirit being in this world?" the ugly cat spoke up, very clearly excited.

"Yes," Kotori replied evenly, although her disgust shone in her eyes. *"In fact, in her condition, it would actually be difficult for her to be Lost to the neighboring world under her own power."*

"Well then, how is the boy now?" the crying mouse asked. *"He absorbed so much of her Spirit power. Have you noticed any unusual phenomena?"*

"We have seen no abnormalities. Not in Shido, nor in the world."

"What? Aren't we talking about the world-killing catastrophe?" the idiot dog said. *"You're telling us that the person who locked all that power inside himself is perfectly fine?"*

"You gave approval to use him after it was determined that there would be no problems, didn't you?" Kotori asked in response.

"...What on earth is he? Those abilities...almost remind me of a Spirit's."

It wasn't just the stuffed animal—this person really was stupid. Sighing in her heart, she replied diligently, "I explained the regeneration earlier. We are currently investigating the absorption ability."

The stuffed animals were silent for a moment, and then the squirrel holding a walnut spoke in a quiet voice.

"Anyway, nice work, Commander Itsuka. Wonderful results. We're looking forward to more from you."

"You can count on it!" Kotori straightened up for the first time and put her hand to her chest.



"...Haaah."

Monday, following the weekend after the "incident."

A number of students were already inside the school building, which had been completely restored by the relief corps. Sitting among them, Shido let out a dull sigh and stared absently up at the classroom ceiling.

He had passed out pretty quickly after all the action that day, and when he came to, he was lying in *Fraxinus's* medical office once more. They had then brought him to a facility where he'd been forced to undergo a thorough medical check, and he hadn't seen Tohka since he passed out. He insisted they let him talk to her, they insisted on the exam, and in the end, he wasn't even given so much as a glimpse of her.

"...Aah."

Absolutely nothing had happened over the weekend, so the dizzying ten days after meeting Tohka seemed like they

had never happened. The two days had honestly been so empty and dire that he'd half wanted to die, but one other thing kept whirling around in his brain.

Shido had definitely kissed Tohka that day. Her Astral Dress had melted away, and he'd felt something warm pouring into him.

What exactly was that?

"..."

He touched his lips in wonder. He could still feel the sensation after three days, and he flushed slightly.

"That is next-level creepy, you know. What're you doing, Itsuka?"

"...! Tonomachi. If you're there, say something. Geez." He turned to look at his friend.

"...I've been here the whole time. And I tried to talk to you. When Tonomachi gets lonely, he dies, you know." He sat down backward in the empty chair in front of Shido and put his elbows on Shido's desk.

"Aah, not my problem, man. And, like, go back to your own desk. Homeroom's gonna start any minute now."

"It's fiiiiine. You know Tama's gonna be late anyway."

"You know, she *is* our homeroom teacher. Quit with the nickname like she's a cat or a seal or something."

"Ha-ha! Whatever. It's cute. She might be older, but she's just my type."

"Aah... You should ask her to marry you then. She'd probably say yes."

"Huh? What're you on about?"

The door to the classroom rattled open, and Shido jumped in his seat.

Instantly, a commotion rose up in the class.

And it was no wonder. After all, *the* Origami Tobiichi had come to school covered in bandages—legs, arms, forehead.

"...Gh!"

Shido himself gasped. He knew that by using a Realizer, most injuries could be healed right away. So the fact that

she was still this heavily bandaged three days later meant that she had been seriously injured.

With the eyes of the entire classroom on her, Origami walked over to Shido on unsteady feet.

"H-hey, Tobiichi. I'm glad you're ok—," he started awkwardly, and then Origami abruptly disappeared from sight. A heartbeat later, he realized she was bowing. "T-Tobiichi?!"

The classroom erupted in whispers, and everyone was focused on Shido and Origami.

Origami didn't appear to mind in the least. "I'm sorry. Although I know this isn't something an apology can fix."

When he was on *Fraxinus*, he'd been told Origami had fired the shot at Tohka. That's what she was apologizing for now.

"Hey, Itsuka?" Tonomachi looked at him dubiously. "You do something to Tobiichi...?"

"As if!" Shido cried. "And if I did, I'd be the one apologizing!"

That said, there was no way he could explain what was actually going on here. He turned back to Origami.

"I-it's fine. Just stop bowing, okay?" he told her.

Origami was surprisingly obedient, snapping back to her original posture. "But," she said, yanking him forward by his necktie.

"Ngh?!"

Her cool expression utterly unchanged, Origami brought her face in close. "No cheating."

"Huh?" Shido's eyes bugged out of his head, along with the eyes of everyone else in the class watching the scene.

With perfect timing, the bell announcing the start of homeroom rang. Still staring at Origami and Shido with deep interest, the other students moved to their own desks. Origami stayed in front of him, staring hard at his face until the goddess of salvation appeared.

"Okaaaay! Homeroom's staaaarting." The teacher, Tama,

opened the door, entered the classroom, and then frowned.
“Tobiichi? What are you doing?”

“...”

Origami glanced silently at Tamae before releasing Shido’s tie and returning to her desk. Given that this was right beside him, he couldn’t exactly breathe a sigh of relief.

“O-okay, is everyone at their desks?” Tamae’s voice was excessively bright, as if to calm the unsettled air in the classroom. Then, as if she’d just remembered something, she clapped her hands and nodded to herself. “Right, right. I have a surprise for you before we take attendance today! Come on in!” she called back to the door through which she had just entered.

“Mm.” He heard a certain voice in response.

“Wha...?” He gasped.

“—” Next to him, Origami was just as surprised.

“This is Tohka Yatogami. She’ll be joining us as of today. I hope you’ll all make her feel welcome.”

Tohka entered the classroom wearing a high school uniform and an incredibly cheery smile.

A clamor rose up immediately at her blinding beauty, but not paying any mind to the eyes on her, Tohka picked up a piece of chalk and wrote *Tohka* on the board in clumsy characters. Then she nodded with satisfaction. “Mm.”

“Wh-why are you...?” Shido stammered.

“Hmm?” Tohka turned her gaze toward him. Those eyes housed a fantastical brilliance and shone so strangely.

“Oh, Shido! I missed you!”

She bounced over to stand immediately next to his desk, in the exact same place Origami had been standing until a moment earlier.

Once more, Shido was the subject of everyone’s rapt attention. He could hear voices all around him speculating unfairly on the nature of their relationship and others wondering at his involvement with Origami.

“T-Tohka?” he said quietly, so that the other students

wouldn't hear him, starting to sweat. "What are you doing here?"

"Mm, they finished their tests and everything." Copying him, Tohka also spoke in a quiet voice. "I guess over ninety percent of my power is gone. This is a welcome development, though. The world won't cry anymore just because I'm here. So your little sister pulled some strings for me."

"A-and the surname?" Shido pressed.

"What was her name again? That sleepy-looking lady gave it to me."

"Damn them!" Shido ran his fingers through his hair and flopped down on his desk. He was glad they'd freed Tohka, but there were other ways of doing it.

The girl in question, however, looked entirely unperturbed. "What, Shido? You seem down. Aah, were you perhaps sad because I wasn't around?" she asked, entirely serious—and loud enough for everyone around them to hear.

The commotion in the classroom reached peak levels.

Feeling more uncomfortable than should have even been possible, Shido managed to speak somehow. "Hey...! Don't say stuff like that."

"Huh, so cold. Even though you wanted me so desperately back then." She clapped her hands to her cheeks, an embarrassed look on her face. "Oooh."

He felt the air around them change. People were typing out messages on their phones under their desks. His name was going to spread through the school at light speed.

"Th-that's not what happened, Tohka!" Shido raised his voice, too. "I-if you say it like that, everyone'll get the wrong idea!"

"Mm? So you're insisting it was the wrong idea?" She looked away sadly. "But it was my first time."

"—! ...Ngh!"

The fatal blow. Most likely, Kotori and Reine had

whispered that unnecessarily into her ear.

The class erupted into chaos, heedless of the teacher's call for restraint.

"Huh...?" Tohka turned her head to the side.

A pen whooshed in front of Shido's face.

"Whoa?!" Surprised, he looked for the source and found Origami turning cold eyes on him, arm still raised after launching the pen.

"...Mm?" Tohka looked at the other girl.

"..." Origami looked back.

Their eyes met.

"Mm. Why are *you* here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Origami replied frostily.

A bomb was about to go off.

Thankfully, neither of them seemed interested in going to battle at that moment.

That was only natural. One had lost the majority of her power; the other was injured and without her equipment.

"O-okay! Game's over! That's enough! Okay?! Friends?!" Ms. Okamine hurriedly inserted herself between the two girls and somehow managed to pull them apart.

"Okay, Yatogami, your desk—" The teacher looked around for a seat for Tohka.

"No need." Tohka turned sharp eyes on the student sitting on the other side of Shido. "Go."

"E-eeeek!" Overwhelmed by the pressure, the girl sitting there fell out of her chair.

"Mm. Thanks," Tohka said, and sat elegantly before turning her gaze in Shido's direction. However, it wasn't his eyes she met but rather Origami's.

"..."

"..."

"..."

The two young women glared at each other silently.

Shido was happy that Tohka would be able to stay in this world. He was grateful to Kotori and the others who had done the things necessary to make it happen. He was also

relieved that Origami was alive. But this was what might be called the final, decisive battle.

“Aaah...”

Glinting eyes bearing down on him from both sides, Shido cradled his head in his hands.

Afterword

Hello, nice to meet you, and it's been a while. I'm Koushi Tachibana. Wait. That's a contradiction.

How did you like *Date A Live: Dead-End Tohka*?

The initial idea for the book was “wouldn't it be kind of funny if the members of a secret organization were very seriously playing a dating sim”? Like, imagine a torso shot of a beautiful 2D girl on the large screen on the bridge of a battleship, and the captain and everyone are trying to choose an option, sweat pouring down their faces. If the girl's reaction is bad, they're all like, “Wh-what?!” and it's all sirens and emergency alarms! “We've got a situation on our hands! You've got to keep it together, Wilbur! The affection meter has taken a hit! Medic! Mediiaaiic!!”

When I added a few other spices to this base flavor, it became the story that's in your hands now. I hope that you enjoyed it.

I don't know how long it will be, but I plan to continue. There should be a preview on the next page, so please have a look.

Incidentally, my other series *Blue Sky Karma* is also ongoing, so if you liked this book, I'd appreciate it if you could take a peek at that series, too.

Now, I owe the creation of this novel to the efforts of a number of people. First and foremost, the illustrator, Tsunako. I was already astounded at the character design

stage. How do you manage such quantity and quality?

I really wish I could show all the concept art to the world. If this story sells well, I might get that opportunity, so...you know what to do. (*Winks.*)

My editor and everyone else involved in the production of the book were also a tremendous source of help. They really made me understand in true beginner's style that you can't make a novel alone. Above all else, my greatest and most heartfelt thanks to you for picking up this book.

Well then, next time—um, let's meet again in either Volume 2 of this or Volume 8 of *Karma*.

Koushi Tachibana

NEXT VOLUME *SECOND SPIRIT, INCOMING!*

Shido's world has been turned upside down ever since he ran into one of those ethereal Spirits. He has a feeling he'll never be the same again, though things are starting to look up, slowly but surely.

Other than the occasional brawl between Tohka and Origami, there's been no incidents worth noting...until Shido returns home one day to find...

"Wh-what are you doing here, Tohka...?!"

"Mm? Haven't you heard from your sister? Seems I'll be living here for the time being as some kind of training."

"T-training...?!" Shido doesn't like the sound of this.

Apparently, they're going to be living under the same roof—starting now.

As if that isn't enough, Shido has a run-in with a new Spirit: a little girl tearing through the city without an umbrella, drenched in the rain.

When Shido rushes in to help her after she slips and falls, it's the rabbit-shaped puppet fixed on her hand that starts to speak to him first, for some strange reason.

"Whoa there, buddy. Sorry about that. Thanks for the help, bro. Anyway, seems like you were getting handsy with Yoshino when you helped her up. How'd it feel? Be honest. How'd it feeel?"

"E-excuse me...?"

Get ready for a new kind of meet-cute—one with a twist!

"Whoa there, buddy. Sorry about that. Thanks for the help, bro. Anyway, seems like you were getting handsy with Yoshino when you helped her up. How'd it feel? Be honest. How'd it feeel?"

Date A Live 02

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